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Idaho Tom, The Young Outlaw of Silverland; OR, The Hunters of the Wild West.

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"BOWIE-KNIFE BEN," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. IDAHO TOM.

High above the level of the sea reposed Lake Tahoe in its mountain thralldom.

The white, crispy snows of perpetual winter looked down from amid the clouds upon the silent, glassy sheet.

The grim old mountain seemed to rear its head aloft as if proud of the tiny jewel it held clasped to its rugged bosom, and in which its stone-scarred face had been reflected, no doubt since creation's rosy morn.

To and fro around the verdant shores, in and

out of the shadows and sunshine of a summer day, like a weaver's shuttles, played the graceful deer, the fox and the hare; while a thousand plumed wings flecked the glossy bosom of the deep with their swift moving shadows.

From the craggy heights almost lost in the clouds of heaven, where the monarch of the air whetted his beak and laughed his maniac laugh, the mountain goat looked down from its wintry home upon the smiling summer-land.

The air was still fresh and fragrant with the cool breath of morning. The breeze toyed with the somber pines as a thoughtless maiden toys with the rose; all the machinery of nature was in motion with the pulsing, throbbing, thrilling life of another day, when a bird started up on airy wing with a frightened scream, and soaring aloft, winged its way from the northern shore of the lake.

The cause of this alarm soon became manifest; a man whistling a sprightly lay issued suddenly from the great pine woods, his feet keeping time to the tune he was trilling.

On the shore of Silver Bay, a circular body of water joined to Tahoe by a narrow strait, the

man paused, and, doffing his hat, bowed to the figure of himself that was reflected in the glassy waves.

"Good-morning, my romantic vagabond," he said, in a voice almost musical; then he broke into a peal of laughter, soft and pleasant as a maiden's.

Idaho Tom, the Outlaw of Silverland, was a fine specimen of physical manhood, though a mere boy in years. In spite of his youth, however, his name was upon every lip in all Nevada—at times coupled with crimes that were in violation of the laws of God and man; and then again deeds of kindness, mercy and daring were attributed to the wild, wayward adventurer. And as the good in the heart of Idaho Tom neutralized the bad, he was admired as well as hated; respected as well as feared. He was a warm friend, a deadly foe—withal, a strange, mysterious boy, who seemed to have been thrown loose upon the cold world, to be buffeted about by the winds of adversity.

In years he was not over nineteen. His form was straight as an Indian's, rather slender, but possessed of the muscular development of an athlete, and the wiry suppleness of a gymnast. A



HE SWUNG TO AND FRO IN MID-AIR OVER THE BLACK ABYSS, IN THE JAWS OF DEATH.

pleasant, dark-gray eye, keen as the hawk's, shot its fiery glances from beneath heavy, arching brows. The nose was just aquiline enough to give an expression of Roman courage and firmness to the character.

He was dressed in a suit that fitted close and neat, showing to advantage the outlines of his fine form.

He carried a small breech-loading rifle slung at his back by means of an ornamented strap passing over his right shoulder, across his breast and under his left arm. A pair of revolvers and a hunting-knife were in his girdle.

He was followed by a large sleek grayhound, which, for grace of movement and delicate symmetry of form, could scarcely be equaled by the gazelle. Around the animal's neck was a silver collar fastened by a tiny padlock. The name of the young master was engraved in script upon the jeweled band.

"And so we're standing upon the shores of the wonderful Tahoe, Lance, my dog," the youth said, to his dumb companion, who evinced an almost human comprehension of what was said, and answered by thrusting his sharp muzzle through the half-closed fingers of his master. "Yes, for the first time we are standing on Tahoe's romantic shore. And oh, for a draught of cool water! A long walk we've had of it, with the mercury at a boil. But this sight repays us; it is beautiful, sublime! Oh, Tahoe!—lake of the clouds, with the snow-helmeted mountains mirrored in thy depths! Beautiful captive, held in chains by rock-ribbed hills! What a sight! Reposing in the lap of summer, while from yon mountain high winter shakes his hoary head at thee! But, fiddlesticks! what does all this amount to, anyhow! It's lavishing unappreciated romance upon the 'desert air,' and so I—"

His meditations were interrupted by a movement of his grayhound, whose nose was thrust upward, while his keen eyes searched the cliffs that rose behind him. The delicate nostrils quivered with the intensity of his excitement. That he had detected something that boded danger, his young master had not a doubt. The youth watched the animal until his eyes finally rested upon the object they had been searching for; then the lad turned and glanced up the cliff just in time to see a plumed head disappear behind a sharp ledge about forty rods away.

"Ghost of Cæsar!" exclaimed the boy, unslung his rifle, "that was an Ingin's top-knot, or else I'm a wandering lunatic. And now, Lance, my dog, we've got to look a little out and keep ourselves seldom. So let's to shadow and wait for time to adjust matters."

The Young Outlaw of Silverland moved back from the bay and up the cliff until he had gained the cover of a clump of bushes. Here he threw himself upon the earth, and with a reckless disregard of danger, assumed a position of ease, trusting solely to his noble hound for security.

Nearly the whole of the bay was now concealed from his view by the dense shrubbery. Only a little cove or indentation, in the shore at the foot of the cliff before him, was visible; and upon its bosom was an object that arrested his attention.

It was a canoe, or rather a skiff, for it was provided with oars that now hung loose in the row-locks. It was a small affair, and yet for neatness of construction and symmetrical shape, it was such as was seldom seen in Western waters. The inside was painted red, and the outside streaked and ringed in just such fanciful colors as would captivate the soul of an Indian. At the prow was the figure-head of a swan's neck and head, the former tapering gracefully up from the body of the boat—the whole evincing the work of a skillful artisan.

Idaho Tom became so deeply interested in the handsome little craft that he entirely forgot the plumed head he had seen, up behind the ledge. He had not the remotest idea how the boat came there, who the owner was, nor why he had lavished such skill and labor on a thing so insignificant in general usefulness. He argued to himself that it must have been made where style and beauty were the first considerations, and had been carried there by some person or persons who were indulging in a season of hunting and fishing around Tahoe. If such was the case, then the owners were not far away, and the young "vagabond," as he termed himself, resolved to await their return.

Something about the skiff, the solitude of the place, and the stealthy movement of that plumed head above, excited the youth's curiosity to the highest degree, and, with the patience of an Indian, he waited and watched.

The sun mounted higher and higher, as the minutes wore away into hours. Birds chirped and sung in the stately pines above and below. Still and silent upon the glassy waves lay the gay little craft.

To Idaho Tom, waiting and watching grew to be monotonous, and he finally became drowsy, reclining under the murmuring pines. But the time was all his own, however heavy it hung upon his hands. He had but one master to serve, and that was himself.

Lance suddenly started up, and, with ears erect, glanced down at the little skiff. The young master rose to a sitting posture, and glancing down toward the bay, uttered a soft whistle, indicative of surprise.

Out from the adjacent shadows he saw an Indian creep with the stealthiness of a serpent. The face of the redskin was all aglow with savage curiosity. His keen, black eyes were fixed, with a covetous glare, upon the little boat that lay motionless upon the bosom of the bay.

With hesitating footsteps, the warrior continued to advance toward the water's edge. Now and then he paused as if in doubt, and glanced beyond the skiff—out over the bay. By his movements, Idaho Tom thought there must be something abroad which the Indian feared; but the intervening foliage and forest shut off the view.

After considerable time spent in retreating and advancing, the savage finally reached the water's brink. Here he stood for full a minute, half crouching, and watching something out over the bay. But the desire to possess the gay little craft upon the water, seemed to have got the better of his fears, and he cautiously entered the boat, and gazed around him, up and down the bay, as if in doubt which course to take, in his flight with the skiff. Finally, however, he seated himself upon the thwart, grasped the oars, and attempted to turn the craft out from shore. But, at the same instant, a cry escaped his lips, and his whole form was shaken, as if with a fit. His face became contorted with all the horrible agony of a man upon the rack, and, still clinging to the oars, he tugged and quivered, as if trying to tear himself away.

"Great ghost of Cæsar!" exclaimed the young outlaw, starting to his feet. "What in the name of mystery ails the painted vagabond! Is he possessed of the devil?"

CHAPTER II

THE FLOATING ISLAND.

IDAHO TOM arose from his seat, adjusted his side weapons, and strode from his concealment.

Down the hill he went, straight toward the savage, with his grayhound at his heels.

The contortions of the red-skin seemed to be growing worse each moment, as he tugged and pulled at the oars, until it seemed as though the veins in his face and neck would burst.

"Harkee, red-skin!" exclaimed the young outlaw, in a clear, distinct tone, "art thou possessed of Satan! or hast thy intemperate habits induced serpents to infest thy moccasins! Speak out, you son of a Piute, or I'll spring a leak in thy anatomy."

In answer, a horrible groan issued from the lips of the savage.

Idaho Tom advanced still closer to the water's edge, but the Indian seemed to take no notice of his presence. Then Tom uttered a sharp whistle, and his grayhound barked, but the savage still continued his violent contortions.

Idaho Tom was completely nonplused. He saw that the red-skin was not attempting to deceive him, but could form no idea of the cause of such sufferings—the invisible power that held him there in the canoe, in all evident agony. But, even while he stood speculating over the matter, the Indian released his hold upon the oars, sprung to his feet, and, turning his head, glanced wildly at the young outlaw. His face was covered with great drops of sweat, and wore a look frightful to behold. His breath came quick and hard, and his very frame trembled like a reed in the wind; then, with a low cry, the savage sprung from the canoe, and fled away into the woods.

"Verily, I say, that beats his Satanic majesty all holler," exclaimed Idaho Tom. "But I reckon he is subject to spasms and had an attack. But now then, what have we out there?"

It was apparently a floating island, which for the first time arrested his attention. It stood out some fifty or sixty rods from the shore, near the center of the bay.

For several moments this object held the attention of the youth, for something about it excited his curiosity to the highest pitch. He was satisfied it was a floating island. He could see that a perfect forest of shrubbery and vegetation was growing

upon it, and in its midst stood half a dozen tents. This told that the island was inhabited, and that its inhabitants were civilized people.

Who were they? The Young Outlaw of Silverland resolved to know and to hazard much in a flying visit to the island, by means of the little skiff that lay at his feet.

Stepping into the light craft, Tom called his dog in and then seated himself. He took hold of the right oar, and raising it out of the water, glanced along the slender blade with a critical eye. Then he seized the left oar; but, simultaneous with the act, a cry burst from his lips and he was pitched violently forward—prostrate in the boat, as if under the blow of an invisible hand.

In an instant the youth was upon his feet, gazing around him with a half-puzzled, half-terrified look.

"Tornadoes and earthquakes! Who struck me, Lance?" burst from his lips. "Oh, Lord, but it was a socker!—pulled every nerve in my body. Durn the canoe!—it's enchanted, and I'm going to vacate. I've changed my notion, old pard, 'bout going to the island," and taking up his rifle, Idaho Tom leaped lightly ashore.

With a puzzled look he stopped and regarded the little boat for a moment; then, with a muttered imprecation, he turned and moved away, whistling merrily to overcome his confusion.

Up on the hillside, where he could overlook the bay and the floating island, he came to a halt, and among the dense shrubbery concealed himself.

The floating island now became the first object of consideration. Its shape was rectangular, half cut in two by a little cove or harbor in the side. The whole was covered with a growth of vegetation which had evidently been transplanted there by the hand of man. Here and there were little clusters of flowers. Aquatic plants and moss grew along the margin, trailing their green festoonery in the water and concealing the ragged edges of the island.

In this shrubbery the tops of several tents were distinctly visible. Two or three canoes lay in the little harbor. But no sign of life was visible about the place unless it were the small birds that twittered around it. The island, as well as all its surroundings, wore an air of incongruous solitude. The unnatural silence seemed like a solemn admonition to the young outlaw to depart at once.

Something rustled the bushes near him, and the next moment a lithe figure swept past him like the wind. It was the figure of a woman—a young girl rather, upon whose white face was an expression of terror.

That she was being pursued—fleeing from some one or something, was evident from the thrashing noise in the shrubbery behind her, and then a powerful Indian, who was panting like an overworked ox, glided into view. His form was bent forward, and like a hound he was following upon the trail of the fair stranger.

Only a foot or two of dense shrubbery separated the youth from the point where the warrior must pass; and, acting under the impulse of the instant, Tom thrust the muzzle of his rifle through the shrubbery, and the red-skin stumbled and fell over it.

"Avaunt!" exclaimed Idaho Tom, springing from his concealment and confronting the savage with a cocked revolver; "avaunt, old morning-glory!"

The savage was on his feet in an instant. The eyes of the two natural foes met. The savage's face assumed a look of consuming rage, and that of the young outlaw a smile of grim triumph. The savage grasped his knife—Idaho raised his revolver. The savage uttered an indignant grunt—Idaho made a wry face at him.

"Are you a man, or a sneaking wolf?" demanded Tom, contemptuously.

"Ugh! me red-skin brave," was the fierce reply.

"A romantic red-skin you are!" responded Tom, "to go trailing a woman—a helpless little girl. By the great ghost of old Caesar, I've a notion to let blizzer."

"White boy talk big," said the Indian, manifesting no fear, evidently to talk the youth off his guard.

"I'm an avalanche, Ingin, when I get a-going; and that dog there is a perfect tornado. Between us two, we are mortal destruction—a perfect plague; if you draw that old saw-blade of a knife, you're a goner. I'll blow you plumb through, I will!"

"The sound of your pistol bring lots Ingin then," replied the cunning foe.

"I don't care, if that mountain dissolves into its weight in

red-skins the next minute, I'll blow you to Guinea if you draw that knife. Ingin, I'm a boy, as you see, and I'm not any too steady in the nerves; and for fear my finger gives this trigger a little pull to see how much it'll bear without going off, I'll tell you what you'd better do, or die. Turn your back upon the sublime Tahoe, and with the stately tread of a war-horse ascend yon cliff. Pint your classic nose directly toward yon lightning-riven pine. Remember, great warrior of the guttersnipe tribe, that if you turn your princely head during the ascent, it will be to invoke a shot from my rifle. Do you comprehend?"

"Ugh!" was the indignant reply.

"I'll tell you again: turn your greasy back on the lake, wall straight up the hill toward that blasted pine, and when you get there, I'll trouble you no further. If you look back while ascending the hill, I'll shoot you."

The Indian understood this, also the situation he was in. Without a word he turned and moved away—not even a look implying fear or trepidation.

Straight toward the tree indicated he made his way with unfaltering footsteps.

With a smile of triumph upon his face, Idaho Tom watched him until he was nearly to the tree, then turned and looked for the maiden he had so opportunely rescued from captivity.

He saw a canoe glide around an angle of the floating island, and in it was seated the maiden, the object of his search.

"Ghost of Caesar!" burst mechanically from the youth's lips.

Then he dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground, and leaning upon the muzzle gazed abstractedly away into space. His mind had been suddenly wrapt in some vague fantasy—a spell that he could not shake off. It had come upon him suddenly. A face rose up before him—the face of the fair fugitive that had so recently fled past him.

"Lance," he at length said, glancing sorrowfully down at his dog, "you have always occupied the first place in my heart—always until now. You are only second now, Lance; only second, old dog."

A deep silence followed. Both dog and master seemed engaged in thought.

A gentle breeze swept up from the bay, rife with the sweet breath of the wild woods.

The tall pines whispered among themselves, but the youth heeded them not.

Suddenly upon the silence burst the whip-like crack of a rifle, and staggering forward with a cry of agony, Idaho Tom sunk to earth.

An Indian war-whoop told who was the victor, at last.

CHAPTER. III.

TOM IS WANTED—DEAD OR ALIVE.

THE warrior, having left his rifle near the blasted pine when he started in pursuit of the maiden, found it ready for his grasp, and turning in his flight he took a deadly aim at the head of the young man, who, in his abstraction, had forgotten all his caution and prudence. The rifle cracked; and, with a wild war-whoop, the red-skin drew his knife and went bounding down the hill to complete his victory by securing the youth's scalp.

As he approached the hound crouched by his young master's body, looked up at the hideous red-skin with an almost human expression, wagged his tail in a friendly, conciliatory manner as if begging the savage to spare his master from mutilation.

But there was no mercy in the red-man's heart. He came on and bent over the silent, prostrate form of the youth. He twined his fingers in the glossy locks of the boy's head, when the eyes of the young outlaw suddenly opened; his hand flew quickly up. It held a cocked revolver. The weapon flashed in the warrior's face, and with a moan the outwitted wretch sunk to earth, a lifeless mass.

Tom sprung to his feet. He had not even been wounded, but the savage's bullet had cut uncomfortably close to his ear. Quick as was the shot the boy's act was as rapid, and the ruse resulted in the death of his treacherous foe.

Shouldering his rifle, Idaho Tom tripped lightly down the hill to the shore of the bay, where still reposed that gay little skiff.

"Yes, there you are still," he mused, addressing the skiff, "and wouldn't I give a bag of the most precious dust in all Nevada to know what ails you! But, great ghost of Caesar! I know you are possessed of the devil, and my festive little gig, I am going to keep an eye upon you. But, for the time being, adieu."

and turning upon his heel he moved away up the valley leading toward Virginia City, the nearest point of civilization.

By this time night was coming on; the blue of the eastern sky was deepening into somberness; the mysterious voices of the night had begun their weird song; and a light breeze springing up went rustling through the swaying pines and moaning among the mountain canons.

Whistling merrily, Idaho Tom pushed rapidly on. His whole existence seemed like perpetual sunshine. His temperament was such as permitted him to accept the bright side of life. Nothing ever troubled him. The love of fun and adventure were the predominant traits of his character; and it was these that had given him the name he bore, the Outlaw of Silverland. He was not, in a literal sense, a criminal; nor was he a transgressor on the laws of the territory, which laws admitted of considerable latitude in those days. Nevada was a mining country, and in the "flush days" everybody ran wild; society was permitted, or rather compelled, to arrange its own police regulations, if such a thing as "society" could be said to have had an existence in the territory at that date. Nearly everybody was busy looking after fortunes, and although many dark deeds had been connected with Idaho Tom's name, no one took the time to investigate the stories; and as he conducted himself honorably as a citizen of Virginia City and stockholder in a paying silver-lode, no one interfered with his liberties. The name by which he was known had nothing to do with his social status, as it was but characteristic of the nomenclature of all mining countries.

Tom was at home either in the parlor or bar-room, in church or in the gambling-house; and always of the same temperament under ordinary circumstances. He did not hesitate to take a hand at poker, or any other game from which he could derive the least bit of sport; and no matter how his luck went, Idaho Tom was the same.

Professionally he was a miner, but he loved the free air of heaven, the sunshine and the excitement of the world too much to shut himself up in a gloomy mine; and so he was content to take less of the profits and let others do the mining, while he gave vent to his exuberant spirits by rambling through the mountains. He had no friends in the place—no one to look after—no one to depend upon him, so he was not troubled about providing for the proverbial "rainy day," and his profits in the mine went freely. He was always willing that the day's earnings should be the price of an evening's entertainment at the gambling-table, for in Virginia City in those days the mining interest centered on the gambling-table.

As he hurried along the valley homeward, the thoughts of the young outlaw dwelt upon the face of the maiden whom he had seen—saved from Indian captivity—that day. It was a sweet, fair face set in golden hair, with dark-blue eyes and pearly teeth, that rose before him as if to mock his already captive heart. Then he would ask himself the questions: "Who was she? Who dwelt upon the island? and what mystery was connected with that skiff? Surely she was not a being from fairyland? The island was not the home of outlaws; nor the skiff enchanted."

Thus musing, as he moved along, his thoughts became more and more perturbed, and it was a relief when he suddenly discovered the twinkle of a light some distance to his left. Pausing he gave utterance to a low whistle, a way he had of expressing sudden surprise.

That the mountains were infested with roving, hostile Indians Tom was well aware; and so the light admonished him of possible danger. There were, however, he happened to know, two or three mining parties out in the mountains on a prospecting tour, and the thought occurred to him that the light might be in the camp of one of these parties. He resolved to make a reconnaissance, and so bent his footsteps up the narrow defile leading toward the light.

The shadows of night were now gathered in the deep gorges and dense wooded valleys. The giant pines bowed to the rush of the night-wind. The long howl of the wolves came down the valleys in quivering echoes. The droning of nocturnal wings filled the air. Strange sounds came from out the realms of No where, and yet they were all but the throbbing pulsations of the dreamy night.

The sound of voices coming down the valley suddenly arrested his attention.

He had scarcely time to conceal himself when two men walking briskly passed him, going down the valley.

Soon they were out of hearing, when Tom resumed his journey toward the flickering light, which he soon approached near

enough to see that it was shining through the open window of a log-cabin.

"Ghost of old Caesar!" exclaimed Tom, in astonishment, "a log-cabin here in this land of hills! What does it mean?"

The youth was astounded. This was something he had not been expecting to find. It was either the cabin of a company of miners, or the headquarters of a gang of robbers and outlaws. Which? He resolved to know.

Moving forward he boldly approached the cabin-door and rapped upon it with the butt of a revolver.

"Walk the chalk!" commanded a coarse, loud, but not unpleasant, voice, within.

The youth pushed the door open and crossed the threshold.

"Gosh almighty thunderation, stranger! 'scuse me—thought it war one of—of my friends," exclaimed a tall, lank, cadaverous-looking man—a genuine type of the proverbial Yankee—as he arose from his chair with apparent confusion and surprise.

"Then you are not in the habit of receiving callers?" was Tom's rejoinder, as he removed his hat and hung it upon the muzzle of his rifle.

"Callers!" exclaimed the astonished host, running his bony fingers through his long, yellow hair; "callers did ye say, youngster? Nary caller! Sich a thing has never happened afore—never. It just flummixes me teetotally—'ca'se I wa'n't 'specting ye. I ar'n't slicked up a bit, and things hangs a little loose and kiltery-like round the room. But then, seat yourself, stranger; rest—tarry—make yerself to home."

"Thank you," said the youth, dropping himself into an easy arm-chair made of withes and cushioned with soft skins and furs. "This is really a surprise; I didn't know there was a habitation within twenty miles of Tahoe—always heard so, at least."

"Ye have, eh? Reckon thar's lots of things in this world you don't know anything 'bout. We've been here a year and more, prospectin' fur gold—that is the boys have, for I'm a free trapper by profession, and foller that bisness."

"Your friends find any silver or gold?"

"Devil take the nugget wuth a continental have they ever found," and the old trapper took a huge chew of tobacco, and began to manipulate his jaws vigorously, at the same time glancing interrogatively at his young guest.

Tom had taken in his surroundings at a glance. The cabin was large and roomy. A ladder in one corner led into the loft. The room was scantily furnished, yet bore an air of neatness which none but the deft fingers and ingenuity of woman could have wrought. In the corner of the room at the left of the fireplace was a large box fastened to the wall and securely closed. On the other side shelves had been erected on the wall, and upon these were arranged some dishes, pots and other culinary necessities, all in the neatest order.

A fire made of pine-knots burned upon the hearth, and an iron tea-kettle sitting before it sung merrily as the hot steam poured from its black throat.

Withal there was an air of domestic comfort about the place and a congenial, outspoken hospitality in the rude language of the host, that called up a train of tender thoughts in the mind of Idaho Tom.

The host and his guest seemed intuitively drawn into each other's confidence, and a general epitomizing of events of the day followed. The host gave his name as Zedekiah Dee, the Mad Trapper. He expressed great astonishment at what Tom had seen and experienced around Lake Tahoe.

"Wal, thar's many quar things in this world, Thomas," the old borderman said, expectorating the accumulations of half an hour's chewing into the fire.

"Lord, what a deluge!" thought Tom, then he spoke aloud: "Yes, I have found that out, friend Dee. Lake Tahoe has its share of queer things. But, perhaps you can throw some light on what I've been telling you!"

"Light! humph! thunder!" exclaimed Dee, "what light do you s'pose I can throw on sich things? Me and my friends hev been here a year, more or less, and durn the thing can we find out."

"Then you have no idea where that girl I saw belongs?"

"No more'n the man in the moon."

Tom made no reply, and for a moment there was a deep silence, broken only by the nasal song of the tea-kettle and the occasional snap of the fire.

"I'd give my interest in the lode to know who she is," Tom finally remarked.

"Even so," muttered Zedekiah, and shutting one eye, he

aimed a torrent of tobacco-juice at a large red coal toppling on the end of a burning stick.

"I can't dismiss the thoughts of the girl from my mind."

"Shure ye wa'n't asleep and see'd the gal in a dream, are ye, Thomas?"

"Asleep?—no; no more than I am this minute. I'd go my bottom dollar on that, Zedekiah."

"Quar, very quar indeed," and another drenching volley of tobacco-juice sputtered among the hot embers.

Tom now noticed a reticence in the conversation of his host which had not been manifested at first; and so the youth, as a matter of precaution, pressed him no further on points which he appeared to evade.

After a few minutes' further desultory talk, the trapper drew an old "bull's-eye" watch from his pocket, and consulting its honest open face, said:

"Stranger—Thomas, it's ten o'clock, or very nigh it, I should think, judgin' by appearances here. That's my time to lay this little body down to rest. In fact, Tom, it ar'n't overly safe and healthy to keep a lite running in the shebang. Thar's many lopin' red-skins in these diggin's, and thar's no tellin' what designs they may have upon the palace. If it be your wish to bunk here to-night, you will ascend that ladder, and in that corner of the cabin you'll find an arrangement that'd be soft to a wooden man to depose upon."

Tom took his rifle, and bidding his host good-night, ascended the ladder into the loft. He had no trouble in finding the "arrangement" spoken of, notwithstanding the darkness of the place. Without removing his clothes, the youth threw himself upon the couch, but not to sleep. He had a curiosity which he desired to gratify, and while he lay upon the rude bed, pondering over the events of the day, and waiting for some movement below, he suddenly heard a low, clicking sound like that made by a telegraphic battery. At first he could not locate the noise, but upon closer listening he discovered that it originated in the room below.

Carefully Tom arose to a sitting posture and applied his eyes to a crack in the loft floor. But at this very instant the sound was discontinued. He was in time, however, to see his host close the huge chest or box in the corner of the room below, heretofore mentioned, and resume his seat before the fire.

The youth kept his watch at the crack, and presently that mysterious clicking began again, and this time lasted for fully a minute. Tom had never heard such a noise before outside of a telegraph office, and he noticed that Zedekiah Dee smiled blandly and rubbed his hands with glee.

The young outlaw was in a quandary. He scarcely knew how to take the old trapper's movements, and while he was pondering over the matter, there came a thunderous rap on the door below, that caused an involuntary shudder to thrill through his whole body.

"Gosh almighty thunder!—that must be a young earthquake buttin' against that door," exclaimed Zedekiah Dee, starting to his feet. "Who in the 'tarnal nation be you out thar? Bring in yer corporosity."

The door opened and the huge, burly form of a white man stepped across the threshold, and pausing, stared insolently about the room. His bearded face, his savage garb, weapon-loaded girdle, and whole bearing, bespoke, in plain language, the desperado.

"Eh, slid out, has he?" the man asked, fixing a pair of wolfish eyes upon the trapper.

"You're a kind of puzzle—a riddle, stranger," replied Zedekiah.

"Ye needn't let on now, lank-legs," replied the desperado;

"I'm Mat Molock, sar, the Wolf-harder, and ar'n't to be fooled with, I'd hav' ye know."

"Mat Molock, the Wolf," said Dee, stroking his long thin whiskers reflectively.

"Yas, I ar', and I'm arter provision for my pets," replied the Wolf-harder.

"Sw'ar, Mr. Molehill, I've no pervision to spare ye."

"You're durned thick-headed, 'less ye are 'jist foolin', and if ye are, ye'd better be keerful. I'm arter a chap what called here an hour or two ago. He killed one of my Ingin friends to-day, and has got to answer fur the crime."

"You don't say, Mattie!" exclaimed Dee, in surprise.

"I do say," retorted the desperado, "and if ye don't trot that chap out here, and that purty quick, too, I'll be your everlastin' sickness. I'll tare down yer roost here—I'll rub ye outen—"

"Hold on, stranger, hold on for the Lord's sake! Be keerful, and do talk like ye war only one man. I never could face a dozen men all 'corporated into one. Don't tamper with me for

fear you raise my Ebenezer. I'm not used to bein' insulted in my own house. I'm a quiet, inoffensive young man, but once riled up I expect all Nevada couldn't stop me. Thar is a chap here, mister; he's aloft in bed, enjoyin' of the refreshin' slumber of youth, and dreamin' of scalps, bears and his sweetheart. And I'm of the solemn opinion, stranger, that he's a howlin' young avalanche on the muscle. I'm of the opinion he'd go through your corporosity as easy as a chunk of lead ejected from a ten-pound carronade—jist scrape-rake-scoop ye right off into eternity."

"You can tell him to git up and step down, for I tell you he's got to come."

"I can do that, ole hoss," replied Dee, "but I don't want to see you hurt—killed! It'll be wasteful of raw material—a pity to cut you off in the bloom of a vigorous manhood. I tell you, Mattygorda Molock, you're in no condition to fight a young bear—a tornado—an attack of deadly cholera."

"I'm not alone," replied the Wolf-harder.

"Oh, you beint, be you?"

Idaho Tom heard the man's reply with a feeling akin to terror. He rose to his feet, and while debating with himself what to do, he discovered a ray of light streaming into the loft through a hole under the edge of the roof. He knew at once that it came from the outside of the building, and placing his eyes to the opening, beheld a sight that would have paralyzed a less brave heart with terror.

In the lurid glow of six or eight pine torches, he beheld as many stalwart forms drawn up in line before the cabin and disguised in most horrible-looking masks. And just as the youth had fairly got his eyes upon these ogreish figures, he heard Molock fairly howl:

"I want that boy, Idaho Tom, and I'll have him, dead or alive!"

CHAPTER IV.

A GENERAL FIGHT.

ZEDEKIAH DEE had caught sight of Molock's disguised friends through the half-open door, and while he fully realized the magnitude of the impending danger he betrayed no sign of fear, nor did he evince any disposition to effect a compromise with the desperado who had so ruthlessly invaded the precincts of his cabin.

The name mentioned by Molock, however, proved a surprise to the host. That name was Idaho Tom. Idaho Tom, the Outlaw of Silverland, was a name quite familiar to him, for it had been coupled with many a dark deed. His youthful guest had given his name as Tom Taylor, the thought never entering his mind that he was the notorious Idaho Tom. But now the idea occurred to him that these very men before him were friends of the young outlaw, and that Molock's demands were made for some secret purpose—doubtless to precipitate a fight between him and the outlaws. Upon a second thought he argued that this could not be, for there was something in the frank, honest simplicity of the boy that appealed to his better nature. He thought Molock must be mistaken as to his guest being Idaho Tom, for he had never known otherwise than that Idaho Tom was an outlaw in a criminal sense of the word.

"Do you hear me?" Molock vociferated at the top of his lungs, clenching his fist as if to smite the old trapper.

"I hear ye, ya-as," drawled Zedekiah, stroking his whiskers lightly, as he debated with himself what was best to do in the premises to avert a collision. He was not long, however, in coming to a decision, and, raising his eyes, said:

"S'pose I refuse to give up the boy?"

"It'll be your death. I'll knock thunder outen you and your cabin, so I will. And now, I'll bet you're a boon companion of that young outlaw."

"Permit me to say, august and venerable ole bloat, that I never see'd that boy until to-night."

"And permit me to say in reply that that's a lie."

Molock expected this glaring insult to precipitate affairs, and he was a little surprised, as well as disappointed, when Dee raised his downcast eyes, and, in his usual calmness of tone, said:

"Stranger, I, Zedekiah Dee, am a quiet man—peaceably inclined, which comes of my Quaker blood. I war brought up in a quiet, rooral district of New Hampshire, and aim to cling strictly to my fust eddication. I am, tharfore, called Zed, the Crazy, or Zed, the Mad Trapper, because of my ole Puritan notions 'bout fightin', and because I decline to offer violence for

everything that's said in this barbarous kentry. But, stranger, I hey, a leetle personal pride, a wee bit of spunk, and a fist that would be a credit to a mule's heel; and, therefore, as a free moral agent, it behooves me to resent your insult. I can't swaller the lie in my own house, and I'll be darned if I will!"

And whack went the great sledge-hammer fist of Zedekiah in the repulsive face of Mat Molock. The blow was so unexpected, and came with such terrific violence, that the outlaw was taken off his guard, as well as off his feet, and was sent whirling through the open door to the ground outside.

With a fierce imprecation, Molock sprung to his feet, and, shouting to his men to follow, he dashed toward his persecutor and was met by the closing door and again hurled back. Before the foe could prevent it, the door was closed and barred.

Then aorse a yell without that fairly shook the cabin. Savage voices were mingled in it. Those disguised forms without were mostly outlaw Indians—Indians who had quit their tribes to follow in the footsteps of the burly Wolf-herder.

The yell was followed by a discharge of fire-arms. A shower of bullets pattered against the heavy door but failed to pierce its thickness.

Lance, Idaho's grayhound, which was in the cabin, now began to bark fiercely.

Zedekiah Dee heard a light footstep descending the ladder, and felt a hand laid gently on his shoulder.

Idaho Tom stood at his side.

"I'm sorry, very sorry, Zedekiah," he said, in a tone that accorded with his words.

"It's a predicament—a dilemma, Tom; but it can't be helped. This fist of mine has so much Bunker Hill spirit in it that it will give vent to its feelin's, regardless of its meetin'-house trainin'. It felt for Molock's face, and found it, and so I'm in a predicament. I've trapped in Nubrasca, Colorado and the Lord knows whar else, and never had more'n one fight a day with the red-skins, and fur that they called me mad. And now, 'ca'se I go up to Varginia City onc't in awhile, and set down to play an honest game of poker, and then lick the wretch that let's me beat him, why it's Mad Zed, or the Mad Trapper. But it's fight now, Idaho; and be you a friend and a gentleman, or an outlaw and a vagabond, it's you and me and your dog here ag'inst the host of Satan. Earthquakes! how the varmints git up and howl and snort; but, if they don't fire the palace, I'll give 'em one hour to pound away there at the door."

"Friend trapper," said the youth, gravely, "let it be indifferent to you whether I am an outlaw or not, so far as my individual safety is concerned. I have courage and manhood enough not to see your life jeopardized on my account. I know, for I heard all that was said by Molock, that I am the person wanted by these fellows. They desire to punish me with death for slaying their treacherous friend to-day. Indirectly it was done in defense of a young girl's life; and if I had the day to live over, knowing even what was to come, I would do just as I did. But by giving me up, friend trapper, you may possibly save your life and cabin. Open the door and I will show you that the Outlaw of Silverland will not stand in the way of a man's safety. Yes, old friend, I will rush forth, and with my noble dumb friend here, take my chances for life and liberty."

"Immortal Shakspeare!" exclaimed Zedekiah, with an air of injured innocence, "boy, what do you take me fur? Do you s'pose I'm entirely crazy? Do you s'pose I've no manhood, that I'd give up a friend who's heroic enough to fight fur a woman? Do you really think I'm afraid of that dancin' horde of purgatorians—that I'm not in a condition to fight?"

"No, stranger," replied Tom, "I saw that battering-ram of yours upset Molock's equanimity in a very healthy manner. I opine you love a fight, but prefer to come out best."

"Yas, that's human nature; but I won't sacrifice a friend for that assurance."

"Then side by side, old friend, we'll play this hand. Two men, or rather a man and a boy, a dog and a cabin are the stakes. We play to save our enemies to win. Pard; it'll take a good hand to win."

"Never mind, Tom, we'll hold 'em. Mind what I tell ye, we'll yoop it up to 'em lively. Yes, Tom—heavings, how the varmints peg into it! Youngster, will you go aloft and see that none of the varmints git onto the roof and remove the shingles and force an entrance that way?"

"Certainly," replied Tom, and he flew up the ladder like a cat.

He was in the loft none too soon. The savages were already on the roof and had effected an opening sufficient in size for the body of a man to pass through; and for a foe to have swung

himself down into the loft would have required no extra exertion whatever, for it was not more than four feet from the floor to the roof where the opening had been made.

Tom paused under the opening and glanced upward. He could see the blue dome of heaven above. He could see old Ursa Major on her nocturnal watch, but the faithful, celestial guard soon disappeared behind a cloud that drifted between. A slight sound accompanied the overshadowing cloud, and at once led to the discovery that the cloud was the head of an Indian—in all probability the same one that had removed the boards from the roof.

The youth quickly drew his revolver, and pointing it upward discharged it point-blank in the very face of the savage. The shot was so stunning and deadly that the luckless red-skin scarcely uttered a groan. With the rigidity of stone he sat bolt-upright on the roof for fully a minute, then his muscles relaxed and he fell forward, and rolling down the roof struck the ground with a dull, sodden thump.

A momentary silence now ensued.

To his surprise Tom heard that same strange clicking sound that he had heard before in the room below. He glanced down through a crack, and saw Zedekiah seated at the huge box in the corner, busy at something inside of it.

He watched the trapper till the noise ceased and the man left the box, then he shouted out:

"I've been a dose of 'hemlock boiled in the bark' to one red-skin, friend Dee."

"Verily, the wages of sin is death, Thomas," replied the old borderman, in a tone of philosophical coolness. "Don't hesitate to be the grim monster to every lopin' infidel that wears a feather or paint. Jist boost 'em right over into eternity without the least hesitation. Never waste a good thought on a red-skin. Be an earthquake, a tornado—a pestilence to 'em, Thomas. Lead yer best trumps alers."

The besiegers, who must have been holding a consultation without, now returned to the attack on the door with renewed vigor.

Blows of tomahawks, shouts, yells and execrations filled the air.

Tom remained on his watch aloft, waiting for some demonstration that would relieve him from an inactivity that was becoming painful.

Something suddenly stirred within the loft—something possessed of life. It was pitchy dark within the room—he could not see an inch before him. The noise appeared like that which would be made by a serpent dragging its slimy folds along the rough boards. That it was advancing upon him he had not a doubt; and for once, Idaho Tom experienced a feeling akin to horror. He was satisfied that danger menaced him—that some one was in the loft—was creeping upon him with the stealth of an assassin!

CHAPTER V.

THE STRUGGLE IN THE LOFT.

It was a moment of extreme suspense and anxiety to Idaho Tom, as he sat there in the darkness of the loft, fearing almost to breathe lest he told the unknown foe, if foe he was, where to strike. The sound was so very faint that he could not tell exactly the direction from whence it came. He was cognizant of the terrible fact, however, that it was coming closer and closer each moment.

Was it a friend of the trapper's who had been concealed in the loft? or was it a savage, who had gained an entrance through the roof before Tom took his position above?

These questions the youth propounded to himself, and, as if in answer to his last question, a tomahawk whizzed past his head, and sunk deep in the wall behind him. It had been aimed at his head, but in the darkness the assassin had aimed an inch wide of his mark.

Tom raised his revolver and fired at the unknown foe, but he, too, missed the mark. The flash of his weapon, however, told his exact location. A figure sprang across the room, and grappled with him. It was that of an Indian, who uttered a fearful war-whoop, as hand to hand he engaged the youth.

Locked in each other's arms, the foes fell heavily to the floor.

The loose boards rattled and banged on the joists, as the two combatants rolled and bounded in rapid evolutions to and fro across the floor, ever and anon striking the wall with a dull

thump and rebounding with a force that shook the cabin to its foundations.

"By the shades of Bunker Hill!" exclaimed old Zedekiah Dee, "the boy's in trouble. A red slug of Satan has got into the loft, and now they're havin' it, nip-and-tuck. Oh, mothers of the Pilgrim Fathers! how I do hope the boy'll come out best! If I only dare leave this door—if I could only boost his dog upstairs, he might be saved. Hurrah up thar, Thomas! Scoop the varmint if ye can—into him teeth and toe-nails—fist and foot! Give him a sample of Bunker Hill, Tippecanoe and old Seventy-Six, too! Show him that you're a son of ole Hail Columby Happy Land, and—"

The trapper's words were here cut short by a renewed attack upon the door by the foe without, which lasted for several minutes. But failing to force an entrance, the enemy again became quiet—renewing the attack at intervals.

The fight still went on in the loft. Still Zed dare not leave the door. The blows of the enemy were liable to jar the bolts and bars from their places, in which case an easy entrance would be afforded to the overwhelming numbers of the foe.

Eagerly and in dire suspense the old trapper waited the result of the conflict above, his own life depending on the success of Idaho Tom. He could still hear the foes rebounding across the floor. The boards rattled and clashed with a terrific sound. The cabin fairly trembled under the violent movements of the two foes in the loft and the blows of the tomahawks without. The clay chinking started from the walls, and a stifling cloud of dust pervaded the room.

A sound like the dripping of water was suddenly heard during a momentary lull in the din of battle.

The trapper shuddered when he discovered a little scarlet stream trickling through a crack between two loft boards and spattering on the floor below.

It was blood; one of the combatants had been wounded, and at such a rate must be fast bleeding to death. But which one's life-blood was it? Tom's or his adversary's? Zed could form no idea.

Still the struggle went on. Here and there blood would spurt through the floor as the combatants changed position.

The young outlaw's hound howled piteously, reared upon the ladder, and made several vain attempts to clamber into the loft.

At length the struggling grew less violent. The blows fell feeble—the groans scarcely audible. Finally the struggle ceased altogether. The battle ended, but which of the two had won? Had either, or had both been slain?

The old borderman was in a greater dilemma now than ever. In two or three places blood trickled through the loft floor with an ominous drip, drip; while not a sound could be heard above.

The trapper's situation was one of extreme peril. He was satisfied that Tom had been slain, and the savages could easily gain admission now by way of the roof, which virtually placed him between two fires. Had his friend escaped, the two might have held out until assistance came to their relief; but now the prospect for his escape looked gloomy.

In the midst of the old man's deep and painful cogitations, something stirred in the loft!—one of the combatants was dragging himself toward the head of the stairs!

The old trapper could hold his silence no longer, and in an eager, excited tone cried out:

"Thomas, Idaho, Thomas! are you alive, boy! For God's sake, speak out! What's trumps, boy?"

There was no response.

Still that dragging noise continued above.

The old borderman repeated his call:

"Boy, is it you!—are you dead?"

As if in answer, the tufted head and blood-stained face of a savage appeared just below the loft floor at the head of the stairs, and there pausing, fixed a pair of searching, glaring eyes upon the face of the Mad Trapper.

"Great Lord of Israel!" burst in involuntary accents from the lips of the old borderman, "Tom is dead!"

CHAPTER VI

A JOKE ON ZEDEKIAH.

For a moment the Wild Trapper stood motionless as a statue, gazing at the savage face peering down upon him from the loft. There was something so horrible in the red-skin's ghastly visage

and sinister eyes that he could not resist their fascination. But, acting under the impulse of the moment, he drew a pistol, and, before the red-skin could withdraw his face, fired upon him. But the evil face was not withdrawn then, nor did a sound escape the lips.

The trapper saw a little scarlet spot appear on the red-skin's forehead, from which oozed drops of blood. It was where the trapper's bullet had struck.

And simultaneous with this discovery, there came the sound of low, suppressed laughter from the loft. Zedekiah paused, held his breath and listened.

The sound grew louder and louder, and finally developed into an easy, rollicking strain of laughter.

The trapper's face grew red and pale by turns. A smile of joy passed over his face, then he bit his lips as if to keep back an outburst of sudden rage. But the better nature of the fun-loving old man prevailed, and he, too, burst into a peal of hearty laughter.

The old borderman had been the victim of a ghastly joke. Idaho Tom lived; he had slain the savage and dragged the body to the top of the ladder, and there placed the head in such a position as would make it appear that the warrior was peering down upon the trapper.

"You young devil-catcher!" roared the trapper, "come right down here, and I'll kick, beat, pound the stuffin' outen you. You're an imposition on humanity—a gigantic fraud—a cheat, a swindle! Come down, I say, and let me congratulate you on your victory—come along, I say."

With a smile upon his handsome face, Idaho Tom descended the ladder. He bore many frightful marks of the conflict in the loft. His face was cut and bleeding in many places, and his clothing hung almost in shreds upon him. None of his wounds, however, were serious, the sharp nails of the warrior having been the only weapon used upon him.

"I'm in none the best plight, friend trapper," the youth said, "as you very doubtless see."

"Well, yas, I see your clothes are sum'at siled, and yer face is scratched outen kilter, but it's good fur ye; what'd ye skeer me to death for? It's a judgment sent on you. And so one of the varmints got into the loft, eh?"

"Yes, I found one there; and was just in time to prevent the second one from coming in from off the roof. But, friend trapper, what do you think of the situation by this time?"

"Precarious, Thomas; not as pleasant as I have seen it in my lifetime. If the purgatorians once git the bulge on us, why, we'll be immortalized in the wink of a lightnin'-flash. But I'm in hopes, Idaho, that—"

His words were interrupted by the fulfillment of his hopes. The clash of rifles without, mingled with shouts of men, told that assistance had come to the besieged.

A yell of triumph pealed from Zedekiah's lips, and opening the door, he rushed out upon the foe.

A short, decisive battle ensued. The gleaming torches of the outlaws told the whites where to strike, while the latter maintained a decided advantage by keeping under cover of the gloom.

Molock and his surviving companions were put to rout. They dashed their torches aside, and sought safety in the fastnesses of the overshadowing mountain.

With a shout of triumph, half a dozen men rushed from their concealment and approached the cabin, rifles in hand. Zedekiah Dee greeted them in the warmest manner.

Some of these men were dressed in the garbs of hunters, others as miners; yet none of them were of the uncouth appearance of Dee himself.

The first to enter the cabin was a youth of about fifteen, clad in a neat, picturesque suit of a hunter. His hair was of light brown, long and wavy; his eyes of a dark-blue color, and sparkling with youthful fervor, and his complexion clear and fair as a maiden's.

"Oh, uncle Zed!" the lad cried, rushing up to the old borderman, "you are safe—unhurt."

"Ya-as, Albert, my boy," drawled the trapper, laying his brawny hand upon the youth's head; then turning to Idaho Tom, he continued: "This lad here, Albert, is Idaho Tom, who's stood by me through this hull fight. He's the true stuff, and fights like a wildcat. If it hadn't been for him, the Lord only knows what'd become of my ha'r."

Albert greeted Tom with a cordial shake of the hand; and the men, strong, sturdy fellows, advanced, one by one, and took the hand of the youth in that warm, hearty manner so characteristic of the true borderman.

The first thing done, after matters had been explained, was to remove the dead savage and clear away all evidence of the late conflict in the loft.

Idaho Tom washed the blood from his face and hands, and repaired such damages sustained by his clothing as was possible.

Albert went about setting the house in order with the ease and familiarity of one reared to a knowledge of household duties.

Tom watched the youth with that curiosity for which he was remarkable—with which all boys of his age and spirit are naturally endowed. From the moment he set his eyes upon the lad, the face of that fair girl whom he had saved from savage power that day was recalled to his mind. There was, without a single doubt, a strong resemblance between the features of the girl and those of Albert; and taking everything into consideration, especially the hospitable manner in which he had been treated by Dee, he felt satisfied that the trapper knew all about the girl, and that she and Albert were sister and brother.

The young outlaw noted every movement of the lad as he went softly about the room. There were a grace in his movements, a beauty in his soft blue eyes, that held his attention and admiration from the first. Suddenly a startling thought forced itself upon him, and was followed by the conviction that Albert and the girl he had rescued were one and the same.

This was not a pleasant discovery or conviction, and he tried to dismiss the idea from his mind. It is true, he experienced a pleasure in one sense of the word, knowing that he was so near the object, the strange young beauty, that had wrought such an impression upon his mind and heart. But the circumstances under which they met, the secrecy of the maiden's identity, the mysteries involved in the lonely cabin—all had a tendency to fill his mind with a vague suspicion. And that suspicion was of the cabin's being the head-quarters of a band of robbers or counterfeiters; and if so, then the floating island on Silver Bay, and that Enchanted Canoe, were, in some manner, connected with their operations.

That the trapper's band and that of Melock were at swords' points was plain enough to Tom; and that the former should extend a protecting hand and the hospitality of their roof to him, in consideration of his services, was natural enough; still Tom could not convince himself that these men were altogether law-abiding regarding the legitimacy of their vocation.

Time and again the youth endeavored to drive from his mind the thought that he loved the fair girl who had been the object of his heroism that day. But, try as he would, the stubborn fact was indelibly stamped upon his heart, and could not be idly thrown aside. The sweet young face, the soft blue eyes, and the sylph-like form—all had made a firm impression upon him. It was a case of love at first sight on his part; and seeing how the matter stood with himself, he resolved to urge his suit as far as he dare—until he knew, at least, that there was no hope for him.

With this resolution firmly fixed in his mind, Tom went out into the night, and alone under the stars aired his thoughts while humming to himself:

"When coming through the rye."

CHAPTER VII

THE BOY HUNTERS.

On a sharp ledge overhanging a mighty canon—a ledge whose top surface was cracked and creviced with a hundred gaping rents—threatening to break loose at any moment from the mountain-side and go thundering down, a mighty avalanche, into the black gorge below—on this toppling spur of the grim old mountain burned a camp-fire, whose light gleamed through the gathering twilight of the summer evening.

Within the radius of light three persons reclined in the attitude of ease and repose, chatting and laughing in a free, reckless manner, which of itself, was evidence that they heeded surrounding dangers with impunity.

These three persons were boys in point of years, the oldest not being over eighteen years of age, the youngest sixteen. They were strong, healthy, hardy-looking fellows, dressed in buckskin breeches and moccasins, with tunics of blue material and heavy straw hats.

They were armed with fine-looking rifles and a brace of revolvers and a knife each; and although they styled themselves hunters, an expert in the lore of the mountain and plain would have readily seen that they were not skilled in the profession. In

fact, they were but a band of amateurs, spending the summer amid the romantic mountain scenery of Nevada, hunting and fishing and otherwise enjoying the rugged life of hunters by vigorous exercise and adventure. They were thorough "Westerners" by birth—at least two of them were, and although they were not as skilled as old hunters, they were not wanting in that knowledge essential to safety and partial success of a hunter.

Frank Caselton was the oldest of the three, and was naturally looked to as the leader of the party. He was a kind, generous-hearted boy, full of the vivacious spirit of youth. He was possessed of a liberal education, and for the past year had been on duty in a Western telegraph office, as an assistant operator.

Perry Bassett was the youngest of the three, and, like Frank, was full of youthful vigor and strength.

Billy Brady, the third boy, was Irish by birth, Irish in wit and drollery—Irish in every sense of the word. Billy's life had been an eventful one. It began as a boot-black in San Francisco, after he had attained the age of ten. He soon quit this business and ran away to sea and shipped in a whaler to the northern seas. He was gone three years, and on returning gave up the sea and took to land again, where for four years he had been drifting about at the will of life's current, when we introduce him to our readers. As will naturally be supposed, Billy was a wild, wayward youth, whose education had been obtained in the school of bitter experience. Being an apt scholar, he soon had quite a knowledge of the outward world in store. Active and nimble as a cat, and brave, even to recklessness, he was also a splendid shot with both rifle and revolver. His stock of camp-fire yarns and sea stories was inexhaustible, and these were always told in peculiar Irish brogue and style.

Billy was a little careless about his person. He was not overly particular about the arrangement of his collars nor the cut of his hair.

His hat had been reduced, by rough usage, to a brimless cap, in the crown of which was a single long eagle's feather.

The youths had just gone into camp after a long day's tramp through the mountains, and they were discussing the events of the day and the probabilities of the morrow over a supper of cold venison and roasted bear-rib.

Finally, when Billy had dressed his second rib and took the third, Frank Caselton remarked:

"Billy, judging from your voracious appetite, I am inclined to think you're fast developing into a bear."

"Och, and yees are mishtaken," exclaimed Billy quickly, "and it's bear fast diviloping into me."

Frank and Perry laughed, as boys will at each other's remarks.

"This am a delicious morsel, b'y," asserted Billy, gnawing away at his rib.

"Yes, it was a lucky shot that brought the bear down," said Frank. "We must roast enough of this meat to carry us through to Lake Tahoe, then we will cast our hooks and change our diet to fresh trout."

"Oh, mother av Moses! and won't it be a happy day when the loikes av us set down to fresh fish taken shreaming hot from the bowels av old Tahoeey! Murder! and it makes me hungry to think about it."

"Hungry! What, after eating the whole half of a bear?"

"Yis, begorra; bear-meat has no taste to mees any more. Nothing but trout will tich the empty shpot in me bosom," and the lad threw a neatly-dressed bone away, and doubling himself up into a ball rolled over and with a quick movement sprung backward and landed square upon his feet.

"Well done for a wild Irish boy," exclaimed Frank.

"Arrah, now, and it's yees that I have seen do better than that—whin the bear growled t'ither day," and Billy indulged in a hearty outburst of laughter, in which he was joined by his companions. The allusion was to a bear-joke which Billy had perpetrated on Frank a day or two before, when, Caselton, believing he was set upon by a bear, had performed some extraordinary feats of ground-jumbling, much to the Irish youth's delight.

"Never mind, Billy," said Frank, "I'll be even with you yet for that bear-trick."

"Do yees see anything green?" asked Billy, placing the tip of his finger to his eye, then dropping upon his hands he kicked his heels into the air and stood erect upon his head. Then he placed his hands by the side of his face, raised his head from the ground, and upon his hands walked once round the fire. Billy's next performance was to climb a tree, to the first limbs, feet foremost. A low, scrubby pine, with long, slender limbs put-

ting out horizontally like the unnatural arms of a dwarf, stood near.

Billy was some minutes making the ascent, but he finally accomplished it to the relief of his comrades, for the feat was attended with no little danger.

Having reached the first limb, and seated himself astride of it to rest, the youth called out:

"Say now, b'ys, and it's my intrust in ould Ireland to the one that 'll foller."

"I'll not attempt it, Billy," declared Perry.

"I can't 'crawfish,' Billy," added Frank, "but I can beat all creation shooting deer, licking Indians, whipping wildcats and—"

"Running from bears," put in Billy, locking his legs around the limb and turning over and hanging head downward. "But now, b'ys," the reckless youth continued, "I'm going to walk this limb head down, and end the performance by swallowing myself."

As he concluded, the lad began moving along the slender limb. The feat was a difficult one, the whole weight at times being supported by one foot alone, which was clasped over the top of the limb like a hook.

Frank and Perry exchanged significant glances, and a light of mischief sparkled in their eyes.

Springing to their feet and seizing their own rifles, and Billy's, too, they started off shouting "Ingins" at the top of their lungs.

A low, sullen, rumbling sound followed, and the earth trembled as if beneath the tread of an avalanche.

Billy started with an involuntary cry of terror and attempted to drop himself to the ground; but unfortunately the top of his moccasin caught on a projecting "snag," and he found himself suspended in mid air!

That rumbling sound deepened into the thunderous roar of a rushing avalanche, true enough. The camp-fire disappeared downward—the whole ledge, to the very root of the tree upon which Billy hung, had sunk downward—carrying trees, stone and earth in one awful mass.

The trees near the edge of the precipice swayed violently in the current of air that rushed downward into the vortex. Soon the air became filled with dust and dirt that floated up in blinding clouds.

Frank and Perry's escape had been miraculous, although their own violent movement had doubtless been the hair that turned the scale and sent the mighty mass into the canon, thousands of feet below.

Wrapt in the gloom of night now rendered blinding by the thick cloud of dust that filled the air, the two boys stopped and listened. All was silent save the sullen roar of the avalanche away down in the canon.

"Perry, I am afraid our joke will turn to mourning," said Frank.

"Poor Billy! his words have come true. He said the ledge was not safe, the ground on the top being all cracked and seamed—certain evidence of a threatened land-slide."

"Hilp! hilp! for the love av Moses, hilp!" was the cry that wailed through the gloom.

"Billy lives!" cried Frank.

"God be thanked!" rejoined Perry, and the two started to their friend's assistance.

They knew, by the cold current of air now rushing up from the gorge, when they were near the edge of the precipice. They stopped and peered around them, but all was blinding gloom. Billy's cries still rung upon the air.

Dropping upon their knees the boys hastily scraped a lot of dry pine needles into a heap, to which a burning match was applied. The flames flashed up and pierced the surrounding gloom for several feet. They saw that they stood upon the edge of the precipice, and the blood almost froze in their veins when they beheld the situation of Billy Brady.

Suspended by one foot, he hung over the awful depths of the canon—several feet beyond the reach of human help.

Perry hastily climbed the tree, some of whose roots were laid bare by the slide, and attempted to crawl along the limb to his friend; but the slender branch began to crack and sway, threatening to snap off and precipitate both into the awful depths below. He was forced to go back.

Billy's imploring cries grew louder—echoing in quivering intonations through the dismal night.

Frank and Perry exchanged glances full of the most intense agony. What were they to do?—what could they do?

Billy's escape seemed impossible. He tried repeatedly to

swing himself up and catch hold of the limb, but in vain—his activity availed him nothing now with the swaying limb.

An inevitable death stared the youth in the face.

The howl of a wolf was heard far down the valley as though in anticipation of a feast.

The appeals of the lad became piteous.

The faces of the two motionless friends grew ghastly in the waning light.

"My God, Perry, Billy's lost, and his death will be upon our heads!" said Frank.

Tears gathered in Perry's eyes.

The wind whistled in fiendish glee among the rocks and trees—wolves gibbered on the mountain.

And Billy, meanwhile, swung to and fro in mid-air over the black abyss—in the jaws of death!

CHAPTER VIII

TWO VERY MAD BOYS.

THE agony of Billy Brady himself could not have been more bitter than that suffered by his two companions, Frank and Perry. They had become almost speechless in their fears of Billy's condition. Every moment they expected to see him lose his hold on the limb and drop into eternity.

Billy's appeals grew feebler and fainter. The youth saw, despite his situation, the helplessness of his friends, and his fears seemed to assume a more startling, terrible form—that of the maniac! He burst into a fit of wild, unnatural laughter that sent a shudder through the motionless forms of his companions. It was not a natural laugh, simply for the reason it was not natural for one to laugh in the presence of death.

A moment of dread silence ensued; then a last hope seemed to have inspired Billy into making one more effort for life, and with what seemed apparent ease, he threw himself upward and caught hold of the limb with both hands, at the same moment disengaging his foot.

This was done so quick and easy that the boys could scarcely believe the truth of the joyous fact.

Billy now hung over the cliff by his hands, and lost no time in transferring himself along the limb to the body of the tree, and thence to the ground, where he was greeted with demonstrations of the wildest joy.

Billy deliberately threw himself upon the ground and rolled in a fit of hearty laughter.

Frank Caselton glanced at Perry, and Perry at Frank. Each one's face became almost livid with silent indignation. They now comprehended a certain fact that was both aggravating and mortifying. It flashed across their minds the moment Billy placed himself in his wonted position to enjoy a good laugh over his sly tricks. They saw that he had been "fooling" them all the time, notwithstanding the risk he ran in doing so. His pretended inextricable position on the limb had been maintained at will—his piteous cries had been feigned; and all to repay the boys for their attempted "sell" in the false alarm of "Ingins."

"You young Irish trickster!" exclaimed Frank, in the severest tone, "I have a mind to kick you over the cliff for that dastardly caper! A joke is a joke, and—"

"Ingings!" shouted Billy, dancing about in joyous triumph; and Frank and Perry, remembering that their own attempted sell had probably been the cause of all, joined the youth in his expression of merriment.

"All right, Billy," Frank finally confessed; "this makes the second time you have tricked us. The next time we'll let you hang, whether you're in distress or not."

"And didn't mees tell ye that the ledge would topple over—that it war all cracked up rready to shlide out?"

"Yes; but that didn't justify—"

"Yees in yellin' 'Ingins,'" interrupted the Irish lad.

"Hark!" exclaimed Perry, raising his hand to enjoin silence.

All listened.

Down the lonely gorge, to the left of their position came the clatter of hooved feet.

"Rhobbers! outlaws! I'll bet me boots!" protested Billy, with a shake of his frowzy head.

"It must be," added Frank; "our fire had better be put out."

To extinguish the light, Billy brushed the fire over the cliff with his foot; and then they stood alone in darkness.

They listened, and far down the gorge heard the fading hoof-strokes upon the stony way.

"Begob, and I guess it war the devil," declared Billy.

"Hunting for you, I presume," Frank Caselton replied.

"Arrah, yis!—to git mees out av bad society," was the prompt retort.

When the sound of the hoofs had died away, the boys moved back nearly a mile from the cliff and selected new camping-ground. They did not strike a fire, but sat down and entered into conversation.

While thus engaged, the moon sailed gayly up over the mountain-tops, and shed an effusion of light on the green, wooded hills.

A cool breeze swept up the valleys and stirred the tall pines into a gentle murmur.

Upon a sharp ridge, plainly outlined against the clear blue sky, the three boy hunters suddenly descried a strange object rise as if from out the earth. It was a colossal figure of unnatural shape. They could not make out what it was. They knew it was possessed of life, for they could see it move athwart the sky.

Billy finally suggested that they move nearer the object for the sake of information. His companions acquiesced, and the three crept stealthily forward.

They'd gone but a short distance when a second object appeared by the first. And now the latter began to assume a more tangible form. It appeared to be a man seated upon an animal whose outlines answered to those of a buffalo. There were the short, shaggy neck, the spectral horns and the slender tail; but all seemed magnified in the moonlight to twice the natural size.

For a moment the boys halted and regarded the Titan forms with silent awe, when Billy suddenly cried out:

"Look out, they're comin', b'ys!"

The three sprung behind a huge boulder.

Down the acclivity thundered the strange riders, at a wild, breakneck speed. The earth trembled beneath the tread of their animals' feet.

Strange and grotesque looked the unknown riders as they sped past our friends, and stranger still the animals they bestrode.

For a moment a cloud of dust hung over their trail; and this, with the rustling bushes, the quivering echoes of the hoof-stamps, and their own wildly-throbbing hearts, told the Boy Hunters that the mysterious mountain riders were gone.

"To the divil wid yees!" exclaimed Billy, shaking his fist in the direction that the unknown had gone; "yees are nothing but a passel of bhloody shpalpeens shooting around here on—"

Silence was here imposed upon the speaker by a slight noise before him. The next instant two human figures rose up before them, as if conjured from the earth.

"Ingins, by the Blessed Vargin!" cried Billy, and dropping his rifle, he leaped forward like a hound and grappled with one of the figures.

Together they rolled to the earth, locked in a deadly embrace, and together they went whirling and spinning away in rapid evolutions down the steep acclivity—away beyond the help of friendly hands!

CHAPTER IX.

FRANK AND PERRY MEET A FRIEND.

FRANK and Perry were about to engage the other supposed foe, when the latter spoke.

"Who are you—white men or red?" he asked in English.

"White boys," was Frank's response.

"And we, too, strangers—two trapper-boys, and friends to all save red-skins. Our friends have made a mistake—in the darkness took each other for foes."

"Perhaps we can stop them before they injure each other," Perry suggested.

"I'm afraid it's too late, stranger," replied the trapper-boy, with a dubious shake of the head. "My companion is an Indian boy, and has no superior in strength and activity, for one of his age. And in the use of the knife he is without an equal on the border. I'm afraid your friend will be slain."

"He's a hard chap to handle. He's as agile as the panther and as strong. They may slay each other, but let us follow up and do our best to save them."

"Hist, strangers!"

It was the young trapper that uttered the injunction, and who, throwing himself upon the earth, commanded Frank and Perry to do likewise.

Looking along the surface of the ground, rising gently above them, they could see a dozen or more half-nude forms, half-crouching, stealing down toward them.

It required no words to tell them what it all meant—a band

of savages were upon them, and the only course left them was to flee.

"Foller me, boys," said the young trapper.

Neither Frank nor Perry questioned the honesty of their new-made companion. The frank simplicity of his manner and language was an assurance of the boy's character; and without a word they followed him.

The savages pursued for some distance, but the boys succeeded in getting beyond hearing, and throwing them off the trail.

The young stranger led the way along the steep, tortuous windings of the mountain hills and valleys, and finally came to a halt under a low, projecting ledge of rocks. Here they listened for their two friends and the foe. But all was silent save the clear, mellow voice of a little cascade near.

"I'm afraid our friends will prove the death of each other," said the young trapper.

"I am very sorry, indeed," returned Frank, regretfully, "that Billy was so fast, or that you did not speak sooner, stranger."

"Yes, I am sorry now," responded the trapper, "but I was afraid to speak before I knew what I was doing. But, as soon as your friend attacked mine, I knew he was no Indian."

"No, he is a wild Irish boy, who fears no danger, and who never looks before he leaps, never thinks before he acts. But, stranger, if you will pardon my curiosity, I will inquire of you who you are."

"I'm Richard Cross, a free hunter and trapper—for short, Wild Dick. My friend's name is Bold Heart. He's an Ingin—every drop of blood in his veins is Ingin. We were raised together, and a truer friend the white man hasn't got. Sly as the fox is in eluding the hounds, so is he in dodging an enemy. As a trailer of foe or game I'll put him against any hound in all Nevada. I tell you, boys, it's interesting to see him take a trail and waltz away upon it, as easy as winkin', guided by that subtle, Ingin instinct. And yet, he's only seventeen. But I tell you he's a living example of the long established fact that a wild Ingin can't be 'tamed.'"

"In what respect?" inquired Frank.

"In every respect but about three which belongs to civilization. In two of these he has become proficient as an American citizen. One is chewing tobacco, and the other playing cards. He'll give up a dinner any time, or set coolly down amid dangers, for a game of old sledge, eucher or poker. His love for cards led him into making a trade for a pack of the painted things which he carries with him all the time, and guards as sacredly as though it was a religious duty to do so."

"Billy Brady and he would make a good team," said Perry.

"Yes, and a stiff fight," added Frank. "But, Dick, are you a professional hunter?"

"If you mean by that to ask whether I make my livin' huntin', I'll say yea. I've been huntin' and trappin' here and there for five years. I used to live over on t'other side of the Missouri River, but I up stakes one day and come West. I hunted a long time in Nubrasca on the Platte—me and Bold Heart did; and I tell you, boys, we had some of the jolliest times that ever was. I tell you that Bold Heart is the spankinest, jolly dog you ever see'd. He's dry sometimes, but 'cute as a nigger-baby.'"

"Then your parents are not living?" Frank questioned, growing interested in his new acquaintance.

"No, they're dead, boys," replied the youth, with a perceptible sadness in his tone. "I wouldn't be here if they were livin', for I always thought I had the best old mother that ever lived. I've an uncle back there who wanted me to stay with him and go to school, and learn to be a preacher, or lawyer, or doctor. But, mercy me, boys! I never could set still all day and drowse, and drawl, and scratch and sleep, and toe the crack in the floor in a school-house. Life in the mountains, boys, jist knocks school-fun higher'n a kite; but then it's nice to have an education, and if mother had lived I'd never left her. But I tell you, boys, I love the mountains and plains. Sometimes when I go away up on the mountains among the clouds and there set down to rest, I feel queer in my mind and heart; and then I get to thinking of mother and wonder if she sees me. Sometimes the clouds are below me, and I seem to be floating along in a great sea without a friend near me. Then at times I think I can hear voices in the clouds calling to me, and I start up and answer; but no one comes. Yes, boys, I like the mountains, the forests, and the plains, with their lakes, rivers and stirring adventure. I tell ye what, me and Bold Heart has had some choice old sport in our time, and, oh! I do hope to goodness he'll not git killed! But, boys, whar are you goin'?"

"We are spending the summer here in the mountains, and are now on our way to Lake Tahoe," replied Frank.

"To Lake Tahoe! Gosh, boys, I'll bet you'll hustle away from there in a hurry."

"Why so?"

"It's haunted, boys!" and Dick's voice fell almost to a whisper.

"Haunted?"

"Yes, sure as gully."

"There is no such thing as ghosts, Dick."

"Oh, but there is, though; you can't beat that into me, boys. They used to tell me 'bout 'em when I was a little shaver; and if you'll go with me down to the lake I'll show you some things that'll raise the very hat off your head."

"Well, we are bound for the lake, and if Billy turns up all right, we'll go in the morning, and I am sure your company will be very acceptable."

"Very well, boys, I'm your poke-berry blossom," exclaimed Dick, enthusiastically. "I will convince you what I have said is true, and now, looky here: what would you think if you war to see an empty skiff standin' on the water, and then see an Ingin get into the canoe and go into fits just the instant he sets down and takes hold of the oars, and—"

"Wouldn't think there were any ghosts about that," interrupted Perry.

"Well, but stop—wait till I git through," interposed the young hunter: "now, suppose that, after the Ingin goes into a fit—gits perfectly harmless—a hand, a human hand with a knife in it, would appear from the water and smite that Ingin dead, what'd you think of that?"

"Think it was a mean trick," said Frank, strongly inclined to regard the youth as being superstitious, and his story a myth.

"Yes, I reckon you would think so. I'll bet the chills would waltz up and down your spinal bone like leaves in an autumn wind; for it's a religious fact, boys, I did see that very identikal, unvarnished thing. And that's not all, either. Thar's an island on what's called Silver Bay, and it floats about and has bushes and flowers growing upon it; and I tell ye thar's a slappin' nice smell of posies and azeleas, and honeysuckles, that comes from the island. Gosh, boys, that part 's just bunkim-squintum, I tell you. But one day, Bold Heart and me thought we'd go over to that island and see who lived thar. So we hunted up an ole canoe and put out purty slow and careful into the lake. I tell ye, it's delight to be on the water there, for it's just as clear as moonshine. You can see the bottom of the lake with one eye shut. It's grand to lean over the side of the canoe and watch the fish go galavantin' around like streaks of greased lightnin'. They look three times bigger than they really are, and now and then you can see a lazy old trout lean up against a mossy stone and look up at you with eyes aslant. You can see his gills open and close, and even see him breathing. I tell you, that water's clear, boys—why, sometimes I'd forgit and think I was in the air. When we war on our way to the island, we seen so many curious things that we stopped all at once to look at them good. Every once and awhile, a shoal of fish would sail along under us like birds in the air; they all seemed to be in a hurry—scart like; and while we sat there watchin', what do you think we seen away down on the bottom of the lake, twenty-five feet below us?"

"A ghost, I presume," said Frank Caselton.

"Call it what you like, boys; I see'd a man—a real, living, moving man—walking about on the bottom of the lake. I'd swear to it, deed and 'pon nonor I would."

"Think you couldn't have been mistaken?" asked Perry, inclined to doubt the lad's story.

"Mistaken? Lord, no!—mistakin' nothing! My eyes are good as anybody's, and what I see, I see; and what I know, I know; and what I say, I mean. I did, deed-and-double, see a man walking about on the bottom of the lake, under the water."

Frank and Perry had become deeply interested in the lad's story. There was the candor of truth in his words, however improbable the facts might be. He told what he really believed to be true, while his auditors naturally came to the conclusion that the youth had been laboring under an optical delusion.

"Did he look like other men?" inquired Perry, showing an interest in the story for propriety's sake.

"Not exactly; he had big, shiny eyes, that looked awful when he raised 'em upwards. He had on queer-lookin' clothes—just like the clothes on the soldiers that used to be in the old picter-books that told about the wars in the Holy Land. I tell you, it was kind of awful, and it made me sick as all git out; and if ever you seen two fellers cut dirt for shore, it was me and that Ingin, Bold Heart. But boys, mebbe now you don't believe

this; you've a right to your opinion, and if you don't b'lieve it, just wait till we git down there."

The boys expressed a willingness to rest content until they could be shown the fact in the case, after which, they thought, it would be ample time to express an opinion.

The trio passed the night there under the ledge, each one taking his turn in standing guard.

When daylight dawned, it was at once proposed to begin a search for Billy Brady and Bold Heart.

The three youths had grown very uneasy about these two friends, and entertained but little hope of finding them alive; but, moving from their concealment, they stole softly and silently as shadows down the valley toward that point where their friends had rolled down the acclivity, in deadly struggle.

The trio crossed a little valley and gained the cover of some jutting rocks, around an angle of which was the scene of the two lads' conflict.

Upon all fours they crept around the rock, as though they feared that the lifeless, mangled bodies of their friends would burst too suddenly upon their view.

Wild Dick crept before, and Frank and Perry close behind. In this manner they had gone several rods, when, on turning an angle of the rock, the Boy Hunter came to a sudden stop, and stepping back, enjoined silence upon his two companions.

"Look around the rock, boys," he said, in a whisper.

Frank and Perry craned their necks around the rock, and looked beyond.

But two rods away, they beheld, to their surprise, Billy Brady and the Indian boy, Bold Heart, seated astride of a fallen log, engaged in an exciting game of "seven-up."

CHAPTER X.

A ROLICKING TIME AMONG THE BOYS.

THE scene was as ludicrous as it was provoking to the three friends, Dick, Frank and Perry—the scene presented by Billy Brady and Bold Heart, as they sat facing each other astride of a log, lost in the excitement of a game of cards.

Both of these precocious youths bore evidence of their struggle in the darkness; yet, singular as it may appear, neither of them had received any serious injuries. And how they had brought about an understanding that resulted in the amicable adjustment of their collision, was a question entirely beyond the comprehension of their friends.

That they were safe, however, was certain, and that they regarded their own safety and that of their three companions as a secondary object to the game they were playing, was also plainly evident.

The scene was so comical, and so at variance with common prudence, considering the surrounding dangers, that the three boys concluded to watch proceedings awhile before making their presence known.

Bold Heart was a youth of some eighteen years, and of pure aboriginal blood. His dress, his face and movements, all were those of an Indian, though his features were devoid of that sullen, stoical fierceness so repulsive in a red-skin.

With an Indian's penchant for bright colors, he was rendered a conspicuous object among the green shrubbery by a flaming red sash passed over his shoulder and once or twice around his body. His arms were encircled with bands of silver, and a handsome head-dress with faded, worn plumage, attested his Indian love for barbaric finery. The only evidence of civilization discernible about him was the interest he took in the game he was playing, and the ease with which he manipulated the cards.

But for "tricks that were vain," the young Indian could not hold a candle to his opponent, the redoubtable child of Erin. While Bold Heart kept his sharp, black eyes upon his cards continually, Billy kept as close a watch for an opportunity to exchange a low card for a higher one concealed at the back of his neck—said change being made under the pretense of scratching his frowsy head, and with an adroitness that would have done credit to the inimitable Ah Sin himself.

"That Billy Brady friend of yours, boys, I observe, is inclined to take advantage of my friend Bold Heart—in other words, is a bit of a cheat," whispered Wild Dick, his face aglow with a smile.

"He's a caution, you may bet your life," replied Frank.

"Billy has seen a deal of the world. He's been street boot-

black, a sailor, a miner, a news-boy, and a hunter; and so he has the tricks of all those trades. But a better-hearted or jollier boy never lived than that same Billy Brady. He's cheating now for the fun of it, I dare say."

"Arrah now!" Billy was suddenly heard to exclaim, in a tone of surprise, "and where the divil did yees git that king av thrumps?"

"Me git him fair—me no cheat," replied Bold Heart, a grim smile of satisfaction lighting up his swarthy face.

It was evident by these remarks that Bold Heart had played the last card in his hand, and that that trick decided the game. Billy hesitated to play because the highest card won, and he held the nine only, while the Indian had led the king.

"Inging!" exclaimed the young Hibernian, evasively, "did yees pick that keerd out av the deck?—are yees thrying to chate an honest-hearted Irish boy? It's an inhuman savage monster yees ba to chate poor Billy Brady, the orphan child!"

"Me no cheat 'em—Bold Heart heap honest boy."

"'Pon honor?"

"Yes; heap much honor."

"Well, that gits me, Inging," replied Billy, scratching his head, in apparent perplexity, at the same time exchanging the nine for the ace of trumps at the back of his head. "Mees thought yees had the jack and I've been holding to catch him. But, Inging, you do hold all-killing good hands, and if yees play a few years longer, ye'll show a good game. But, fortunitley for mees, I hold the ace, and so I'll take the trick and count the game for the little orphint child."

He threw down the ace and took the trick, much to the surprise and mortification of the Indian youth. Then he took up the deck and began to shuffle the cards, in the meantime endeavoring to give the Indian instruction in the science of cards. He omitted, however, that part of the instruction which had been so all-important to his success.

While thus engaged, a bullet suddenly tore its way through Billy's frowzy, bushy hair—a rifle rung out simultaneous upon the morning air, and with a groan of agony the Irish lad rolled to the earth.

The cards were scattered to the four winds, to the sorrow of Bold Heart, who, leaping to his feet, sought shelter behind the great rock, where he ran across Wild Dick and his two companions, Frank and Perry.

All believed that Billy had been killed, but when they saw the youth turn quickly over on his face, and level his rifle on an Indian coming toward him, they had reason to change their minds.

"They're coming—a hundred of them!" cried Frank, seeing the danger that menaced his friend; "fire, Billy!—quick!"

The sound of Frank's voice encouraged Billy, and firing upon the red-skin, he sprung to his feet and ran behind the rock, where he was greeted by the warm welcome of his friends.

No time, however, was to be lost in idle words. A score of savages were hurrying around the brow of the hill toward them, incited to vengeance by the fatal result of Billy's shot.

"Boys, we've got to fight a little, I'm thinkin'," said Wild Dick; "foller me up among the rocks on t'other side of this valley."

He led the way along the base of the hills—across the narrow valley and up an acclivity, on the summit of which they came to a halt. In among the huge, sharp rocks that rose up like minute pyramids, they concealed themselves. Here they could command a tolerable view of the narrow valley and the opposite cliffs that rose a little out of the perpendicular. Behind them were the lofty mountains, uprising almost straight into the clouds.

The savages swarmed up the bluff on the opposite side of the valley, in hopes of gaining a view of the Boy Hunters, but the latter at once opened a deadly fire upon them and drove them under cover. Behind rocks and clumps of manzanitas they concealed themselves and opened a random fire on the Boy Brigade.

"Now, boys, for some sharp shootin'," exclaimed Wild Dick; "them red varmints will watch us like hawks, and if one of you want your head plugged with a bullet, jist raise it above a rock. They may try to git in behind us, but in case they don't, we've got to remain here till darkness comes to our relief."

"And wid nothing to ate or drink?" asked Billy with a lugubrious look.

"Nothing," replied Dick, "unless Providence sends us a stray bite."

"All but that," rejoined Billy; "Providence ginirally lets ivery cuss help hisself."

"Boys, look yonder; do you see that Inging's feather over yon-

der just above that big, red stone?" Dick asked, glancing across the valley.

All answered in the affirmative.

"But yees can't pluck it, me boy," said Brady to the young borderman.

"I can try," said the youth, and raising his rifle, he glanced quickly along the barrel and fired. The feather disappeared, but soon rose to view again. There was no doubt now, but that it was a feather in the head-gear of a warrior, who permitted it to be seen in order to draw the enemy's fire and thereby determine their situation.

Bold Heart tried a shot at the tantalizing object, but without effect, otherwise than to draw several shots from the enemy.

"Mother av Moses, red-skin, and yees can shoot no better'n yees can play cards, now kin yees?"

"Oh! much talk!" was the laconic response of the immovable red-skin.

The feather was still in sight, and Billy resolved to test his skill in marksmanship upon the object. Thrusting the muzzle of his rifle through a little crevice in the rock that sheltered him from the enemy, he took a careful aim and fired. And to the surprise of all, the end of the feather was seen to pop upward from the rock and drift over into the valley on a current of air.

"By Je-whillikins!" exclaimed Wild Dick; "you fotched it, Irishman. You're no slouch of a trigger-puller, be you?"

"Ugh! accident," ejaculated Bold Heart, half contemptuously.

"I'll prove thit it wasn't, Inging, some day," replied Billy.

"If you and me sojarn togither, I'll show you, Inging, what a wee orphint child can do. But, red skin, do yees know that yees are dead broke? that yer cards are gone to the divil?"

"Yes, see you throw down—much scared—couldn't run—fall over log—hel hel!" was the disjointed retort of the sensitive Bold Heart.

A shot from the foe now diverted the attention of the Boy Hunters from the not-altogether friendly conversation of Billy and Bold Heart. For some time a sharp firing was kept up between the foes, the savages' bullets, however, falling wide of their mark. The Boy Hunters had recourse to all the devices known in Indian warfare to draw the enemy from his cover, but to no purpose whatever. Each one with cocked rifle sat ready, and the moment a puff of smoke was seen on the opposite side, he would fire at the point where the smoke originated in hopes of finding a foe. But this mode of random fighting, without any known results, soon ceased, and all became quiet again.

It was now observed, for the first time, that Bold Heart was missing; but as there were so many places for him to have concealed himself even from his friends, no particular notice of his absence was taken. But, when an hour passed away, and the Indian had not returned, no little curiosity was aroused.

Why he had left so slyly, no one knew; and how he could have made his escape from their retreat without being seen by the enemy, was still another question that puzzled them.

Wild Dick could not imagine why his friend had acted so queer in going away without saying something to him. It seemed to Dick as though his red friend's usual confidence had been suddenly disturbed, and he had taken that moment to desert him and his new acquaintances. The more he thought the matter over, the stronger Dick's convictions became. And suddenly, as if to add strength to them, a fierce savage yell of defiance was heard far up the mountain side, calling the attention of the Boy Hunters in that direction.

"Lord A'mighty!" burst involuntarily from Wild Dick's lips.

Upon a slight eminence or table-rock, within plain view of the boys, stood the lithe figure of an Indian, clad in a scarlet sash. By his side stood three other warriors. In fierce, defiant tones the four hurled yells of wild triumph down to the ears of the four youths.

"Shades of Solomon!" again burst from Wild Dick's lips. "It's as I've been fearing, all the time; Bold Heart has deserted us and joined the enemy. That's him in his scarlet sash!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE BOY HUNTERS IN PERIL.

BOLD HEART'S desertion proved a serious blow to the Boy Hunters' feeling of security. Upon his superior knowledge of the country, of wood craft, and of Indian cunning, they had based their greatest reliance. Now, they knew that this same skill would be brought to bear against them.

"Have you any idea what induced the young rascal to leave us?" asked Frank Caselton.

"I think I can answer that," said Perry; "because an Indian is naturally treacherous."

"No, friend Perry," replied Dick thoughtfully; "Bold Heart has always been true as steel to me and the whites. But he is very sensitive, and it almost kills him to be defeated at anything. If he has deserted us and gone over to the enemy, it has been through chagrin and mortification, the results of being beaten at cards and shootin' by your friend Billy there."

"He invited me to the contest with keerds," responded Billy "and I bate the blaggard on principle. As to shooting, begob and I bate him at that beca'se I could. Sorry I be fur the young rapscallion's pride; but I only want one shot at him, and I'll bet he'll bate me once—into the happy thramping-ground."

The savages had all disappeared by this time, and all was quiet on the opposite cliff.

Bold Heart's desertion formed the general topic of conversation during the long hours of waiting and watching. Slowly indeed the day wore away, and like a friend, the shadows of night came on.

Wild Dick now proposed that they attempt an escape from their retreat, and having made known his plans and course to be pursued—which were accepted by his companions without a dissenting voice—he led the way down into the valley.

They were compelled to feel their way with extreme caution, not only on account of the foe, but of the innumerable pitfalls that beset their path. At times, again, they were compelled to creep along upon all-fours, and even feel with their hands; and more than once the cold air rushing up into their faces warned them that they were on the brink of a yawning abyss.

After trailing along the tortuous cliff for an hour or more, they finally succeeded in reaching the valley in safety.

Satisfied that the Indians were guarding the canon below the point where the Boy Hunters then were, Wild Dick resolved to take an opposite course, and in this way to give them the slip; so the four turned their faces up the defile and moved away as rapidly as the darkness and nature of the pass would permit.

Wild Dick was not acquainted with this canon—having never traversed it before; nor was he possessed of any great knowledge of the surrounding country, his operations having been confined chiefly to the plains of Nebraska and the eastern foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

As they advanced, the young hunters noticed that the pass gradually grew narrower, and that the cliffs inclined from a perpendicular to a slight incline. Dick didn't like this narrowing of the way, and finally remarked:

"We'll do well, boys, if we don't git our heads into a trap yet. I'm inclined to think, from the nature of things, that we'll find an end to this canon pretty soon."

"I hope not," returned Frank.

But a moment later Dick's words came true: they reached the head of the pass, where further progress was disputed by walls perpendicular and shelving, that rose up around them.

"Boys," said Dick, with slight trepidation, "I'm inclined to think we're jugged. If them red demons git our trail, we'll have a time to git out of this, sure."

"Perhaps we can find a passage, in the morning, leading through the hills into another valley?" suggested Frank. "I have seen defiles terminate in a cavern, which was but the continuation of the passage."

"That's our only salvation," added Dick.

"Then, begob, and we're to pass the remainder av the night here doing nothing, eh?" ejaculated Billy.

"That's all we can do, unless we turn back down the canon and fight our way out."

"I'm contint to shtay roight here, me honey."

Billy's answer was the expression of the whole party's feelings; and so each one sought a comfortable position and seated himself to watch and wait. The moon came up, and although its rays failed to reach the valley, the darkness became "rare-fied," as it were.

The youths had another foe now staring them in the face—gradually sapping the vital energy out of their bodies. It was a foe from which there seemed no escape, for a while at least, and they endeavored to make the best of their situation. This new enemy was hunger. It was more than thirty hours since they had tasted food.

The quietude of their silent watch was suddenly broken by a pebble dropping from the ledge directly overhead. The quartette crept out and glanced upward. They saw a huge hairy mass on the very edge of the rock, plainly outlined against the

sky. It was something possessed of life, for they could see that it moved slightly.

It was a bear. It stood gazing down into the gorge as if debating with itself as to how it could get down into the valley.

"Boys," said Wild Dick, "we're growing desperate hungry, ar'n't we? Another opportunity for procuring food may not be offered soon; and if we all pour a broadside into that bear where he stands, he'll tumble down here at our very feet."

"But the report of our rifles will bring the enemy down upon us, will it not?"

"Just as well die fighting Ingins—better, too—than to stay here and starve to death, hiding from them."

"Blaze away, then," was the unanimous response.

Both Dick and Billy raised their rifles and fired almost simultaneously. A fierce groan, and a lively scrambling on the ledge, were succeeded by a shower of dirt and pebbles. Then the huge body of the bear toppled over the cliff, and came thundering to the earth with a crash that fairly shook the ground beneath their feet. What little there was left of life in the beast was crushed out by the fall.

"There is a king's feast for us, boys," cried Dick. "Roast rib, roast sirloin and roast liver would make a dead man smack his lips."

"Sure, and the ribs and earline isn't rhoasted now, be they?" asked Billy Brady.

"I never knowed a live bear go totin' roasted ribs around with it."

"Won't a fire be another object to draw the attention of the savages?" Perry inquired.

"We'll make that in a niche under the ledge and behind some bushes," explained Dick. "I'll look out a place the fust thing I do, and strike a fire. I'm hungry as a vulture."

The Boy Hunter departed and soon returned with the intelligence that he had found the entrance to a large cavern—an admirable place for their purpose.

While Dick was procuring the coveted portions of the bear, the others set about gathering dry sticks and chunks of wood for fuel. These secured, the party retired to the cavern, and entering it a rod or two, lighted a fire in a deep recess at one side of the main passage.

As the fire burned up, its light reached out through the cavern, revealing the large dimensions of the subterranean passage, whose unexplored extremity was lost to sight in the distant gloom.

All were too deeply interested in the forthcoming feast, the preparation of which was being superintended by Dick, to feel anxious about the dimensions of the cavern, just then.

It required some time to prepare supper, which was got up in true hunter style, and which demands no little skill and knowledge in order to retain the flavor of the meat and at the same time impart a tender juiciness to it. But Dick, boy though he was, proved equal to the task, and finally distributed among his friends a feast that would have tempted the palate of a king.

All ate with avidity and in a silence which attested their hunger. The repast being at length finished, a guard was stationed at the mouth of the cavern. This duty devolved upon Perry, who took his post without a word of dissent. Although the youngest of the party, he was a brave and fearless boy, and shrunk from no duty or danger.

And now the restless Billy Brady was on tip-toe in his anxiety to explore the cavern; and finally he resolved to venture alone through the labyrinths of the unknown vault. His friends tried to induce him to postpone the exploration until morning, but no persuasion could allay the inordinate curiosity of the youth.

Preparing a flaming torch of pine sticks he set out upon his journey. Frank Caselton watched the receding light until it had disappeared.

With great anxiety the return of the young Irishman was awaited. Those around the fire did not think he would be long away; for if the cavern was but the continuation of the gorge, it was possible that it did not extend far.

An hour wore away and Billy did not return. His friends thought it barely possible that he was slipping around, trying to play some joke upon them; and so their fears for his safety were not excited until another hour passed and found him still absent. Then they began to mistrust that all was not right—that Billy was either lost in the cavern or had fallen into danger.

Wild Dick shook his head dubiously, and expressed his fears in grave tones.

Frank Caselton and his friends had pledged each other, before starting out on that summer's tour, to stand firm by his compan-

lions, come weal or woe. And so Frank thought it a sacred duty to go at once in search of the absent one. Dick tried to persuade him to wait till morning, but the youth was determined, and procuring a torch, he set off through the cavern.

The night wore on, and to the surprise of Dick and Perry, neither Frank nor Billy came back. The same unknown fate detained both.

Wild Dick and his companion were completely astounded. They knew not what to do. That Billy and Frank had fallen into trouble they had not a single doubt; and that the same trap awaited them, was also more than probable.

"Well, what do you say, Perry?" asked Dick, at his wit's end in the matter.

"I cannot desert my friends without knowing that they are beyond all earthly aid," responded the heroic little fellow.

"Then I'll stand by you, Perry, through the whole."

Their future course being thus settled, they prepared to set off through the cavern. It was thought best to go without torches, that the enemy, if concealed about, might not know where to strike.

Dick took the lead, and keeping his hand upon the wall to guide him, moved softly forward, picking every step with caution. Perry with his hand on his companion's shoulder, followed.

In this manner they groped their way onward, for many rods. The cavern seemed endless—emblematic of eternity. They began to despair of ever reaching its extremity, when, suddenly, a faint twilight pervaded the gloom before them.

They had reached the outlet of the chamber or tunnel.

Creeping onward to the end of the passage, the boys saw that it opened into a little, oblong valley, upon all sides of which rose perpendicular walls of solid rock.

The faint gleam of a light before them arrested the boys' attention. The wrangle and gibber like that of a hundred wolves caught their ears. The dim, dark outlines of a tall building loomed up against the wall of gray rock, grim and foreboding.

The boys could not help shuddering. The secluded valley seemed overshadowed with some awful mystery.

Suddenly a dull, thunderous noise came rolling through the cavern, in startling intonations. The youths drew back and pressed themselves close against the worn, fluted walls.

That strange sound drew nearer. It appeared to be the pounding of hooved feet upon the stony way.

The youths held their breath in a horrible suspense.

The next moment a light held aloft by a man burst into view. The man was mounted upon a fearful-looking creature—a creature with great shaggy mane, gleaming eyes and smoke-streaming nostrils.

It was a huge buffalo. With a snort the beast brushed past the trembling boys and plunged into the little, rock-bound valley.

The youths followed to the mouth of the cavern to watch the grim, bearded rider. Something like the dull, crunching rumble of a heavy body rolled upon trucks, sounded in the passage behind them. They turned to seek safety again under cover of the cavern walls; but to their surprise and horror, found the passage blocked! A huge stone, reaching from wall to wall, and ceiling to floor, that their united strength could not move, had been rolled out from its secret recess in the wall across the opening, cutting the youths off from escape—imprisoning them in that mysterious valley over which brooded the shadows of death.

CHAPTER XII.

IDAHO TOM AT THE "OPHIR."

WE left Idaho Tom at the cabin of Zedekiah Dee, the Mad Trapper.

Straight from the old borderman's quarters, Tom made his way toward Virginia City. He walked briskly, his spirits buoyed up by a remembrance of the fair, girlish face which had made such an impression upon his young heart.

It was nearly morning when he reached the slumbering village; and, ere he was within his own headquarters, the rosy sky had burst into flame.

The first thing the youth did was to make a thorough ablution of his person, change his dress and then throw himself upon a couch to rest his wearied body and recover that strength which only sweet and peaceful sleep can restore.

It was late in the afternoon before he left his bed. When he did, he repaired to a restaurant and ordered a lunch which he ate with a keen appetite.

From the restaurant, he went directly to the "Ophir Exchange," a mild name for a fashionable gambling house wherein fortunes were made and lost in a single night.

By this time the lights were ablaze in the "Ophir." The house was filled almost to overflowing with men of nearly every nationality. All was peace and quiet, if we except the Babel of voices, pitched in the common tone, mingled with the clinking of glasses and rattling of dice.

Tom crowded his way through this throng, and entered a private room, separated from the main apartment by a curtain only. The room was furnished with a table, easy-chairs, and all pertaining to a first-class house.

A tidily-dressed waiter drew aside the curtain-door, and asked:

"What are your orders, sir?"

"Send a messenger for Jack Hill to come here at once. Then I will take a bottle of Madeira."

The man in white apron retired and soon returned with the wine and information that a messenger had been dispatched for Jack Hill.

Idaho Tom soon found himself alone. With a nervous movement and look of disdain, he pushed the wine and goblets aside, refusing to touch the costly beverage.

Throwing himself back in his easy-chair, the youth sunk into a reverie. The murmur of voices around him disturbed him not. The sullen boom of a blast, far down in the mine beneath the city, where men worked and slaved night and day, he took no note of. His thoughts ran thus:

"Oh, Tom, Tom! outlaw as you are called, vagabond as you are! what ails you, my boy? Are you really in love!—in love with the mysterious maid of Tahoe!—the daughter of the Mad Trapper? But s'pose you are! She's an angel, and you're a rollicking young scamp. No pure, innocent girl would marry the Outlaw of Silverland. But then, Tom, why can't you do better—reform! Reform!—ha! ha! that's good! Talk of a boy of eighteen reforming! That's fast, devilish fast! But then, Tom, you can give up that growing taste for wine; quit cards and rambling about like a lost lunatic, and go to work and make yourself worthy of any girl in the land."

Having thus lectured himself, his thoughts turned to the future.

"I will," he mused—"I will quit all bad habits that make me an enemy to no one in particular but myself. I have done nothing mean nor criminal to debar me from the protection of the law and woman's love, although crimes without number bear, in connection with them, the name of Idaho Tom. But I know, and God knows, what I have done, and what I have not done. Yes, I will cast off my sins and turn my whole life toward winning that girl's love, if it can be done by honorable means. I will take no unfair advantage of her, and if I win her love and hand, my interest in the mines, judiciously invested, will be a good competence, and—"

The door opened, and the waiter said:

"Mr. Hill refuses to come unless it is absolutely necessary."

"It's absolutely necessary," said Tom, and taking a book and pencil from his pocket, he wrote upon a slip of paper the following:

"Dear Jack:—Hurry to the 'Ophir.' Your dearest friend lies in room 4, dying. Tom."

Away went the waiter with the dispatch to the messenger of the house.

In a few minutes Jack Hill came blustering into the "Ophir," a look of the deepest surprise and regret upon his face.

"Was he shot or stabbed?" he asked of the proprietor, as he pushed along toward room 4.

"Who?—what do you mean, Mr. Hill?" demanded the astonished proprietor.

Mr. Hill made no reply, but pushed on and entered the presence of Idaho Tom.

The latter burst into a roar of laughter, rose to his feet, and extended his hand, saying:

"So you have come, eh? You do care something for your old friend, after all."

"Come! yes, and by the gods, I've a notion to shoot you, that your words may be in truth," and Jack Hill's hand sought his pistol in his belt, for he was mad—in earnest.

"Keep your temper, Jack," replied Tom, placidly; "I see you're out of sorts to-night."

"Out of sorts? Who wouldn't be out of sorts to receive a message that a friend was dying, and find out that it was a lie?"

"I wanted you, Jack; but for the world I can't see why you're so mad. Is it because I am not dying?"

Hill looked puzzled by the question. His black eyes snapped,

his lips twitched, and finally he burst into a peal of pleasant laughter.

"Tom, you young vagabond, you always get the best of me," he said, and the two sat down facing each other with the table between them. Then Hill went on: "But the fact is, Tom, I'm having the devil's own luck."

"Don't your claim 'pan out'?"

"Not twenty-five cents to the ton; and, Tom, I'm dead-broke."

"Can't you make a raise 'bucking the tiger,' or sell your claim?" questioned Idaho Tom.

"Sell thunder! Do you suppose anybody's going to buy worthless stock? Just listen to that blast in the mine under this very town! I'll bet it loosened a thousand dollars' worth of the raw material, and you, Tom, are one of the lucky stockholders in the lode."

"Yes, but, spendthrift that I am, I owe all that I'll get out of it in six months. I am here to-night to raise the wind. But, friend Hill, let me advise you."

"Certainly; by all means, if there is anything in your advice—money, I mean," returned Hill.

"There is; salt your claim and sell at assay value of a ton. You'll have no trouble in doing so."

"I know that, Tom; but, Lord A'mighty, I can't raise the saline crystals."

"Trust to to-night's luck. The saloon's full of miners who, I dare say, have come here with bags of the precious evil."

"What of it? I couldn't raise a single 'breeze.' I'm in a dead calm on the equator of total bustedupness."

"I have my watch, some jewelry, and that ring, that I will put up," said Tom, and he produced a beautiful gold ring with a costly diamond setting. "That," he continued, "was a present to me, and I prize it very highly; but I will let it go, upon the stand. I must make a raise, then I propose to lead a different life—a better life, Hill."

"Whew! what's at the bottom of that resolution?"

"A woman."

Hill burst into a peal of merry laughter.

"I knew it would come to that," he said. "I always said you were so constituted that you couldn't resist the wiles of woman."

"Ay, but she's an angel."

"Then she has never flapped her celestial wings in Virginia City. I know all the girls here, and, I daresay, none of them even have the prospect of becoming angels."

"I did not mean an angel in a literal sense of the word, Hill. But she is very beautiful—a flower blooming in the desert, as it were. Away, amid the hills that environ the waters of Tahoe, resides that idol of my heart. And, Hill, some strange people reside there. They say they are trappers—perhaps they are."

"And perhaps they are the men who committed the robberies that have been accredited to Idaho Tom."

"They may be, but that does not lessen my love for the angel among them."

"She may be some man's wife. Boy, you must go careful."

"I'm not a fool, Hill. She's a girl not over fifteen or sixteen years of age."

The voice of a stranger near them, proposing a game of poker to some one, arrested Tom's attention; and as the person addressed declined to play, Tom pushed aside the curtain, and said:

"One or both of us will play you."

Thereupon two men entered the curtained apartment. Both were strangers, with rough-bearded faces. They wore slouched hats, and acted as men would who wished to keep their identity concealed.

The men proposed a game of poker, and showed their honest intention by producing a bag of gold-dust.

Tom put up his watch—a magnificent gold timer.

The four sat down, and the game began.

Tom and Hill played the strangers. Tom and Hill won.

"Salt," mused Tom, pushing the gold-dust over to his partner.

Again the watch was staked, and again Tom and Hill won.

The strangers showing no desire to relinquish the game, Tom put up his diamond ring. The strangers exchanged glances, and put up their third bag of dust.

Tom lost his ring, and the playing ended. One of the men took the ring and placed it carefully away in his pocket.

Tom ordered brandy and cigars. The strangers took of the latter, but declined to drink, as did Tom also.

They talked but little. The strangers kept their hats on, and their eyes bent downward, though it was evident to Hill, who

sat in such a position that he could watch their movements, that they were studying things around them closely.

At length, Tom and Hill found themselves alone.

"Who are they, Hill?" asked Idaho.

"Don't know—never seen them before. Reckon they b'long over to Carson. I'm inclined to mistrust them of some secret motive."

"Indeed?"

"Yes;—but, Tom, where did you get that ring?"

"Of a friend—why?" responded Tom, starting slightly.

The men exchanged significant glances when their eyes fell upon the ring; and they quit playing as soon as they got it. I'll venture an assertion, anyhow, that you'll hear from it again—that it is a missing link to some matter they're sifting out."

"Do you really think so?" asked Tom, thoughtfully.

"I do; I believe they are detectives."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ROAD AGENTS.

Two months previous to the opening of our story a stage-coach was rattling along the tortuous windings of a mountain road toward Virginia City. Four spirited mules drew the vehicle, and James Bartholomew Quick, an important youth of twenty-five years, manipulated the lines, sung the usual songs of his craft, retold the stereotyped stories, swore the new-fangled oaths, and discussed religion, politics and the prospects of Nevada, in that old way so peculiar to this class of individuals.

In the coach were three passengers, two men and a woman. The elder of the two men was perhaps fifty years of age, the other about thirty. Both were dressed in citizens' suits of gray. The lady was evidently quite young, although her face was concealed by a thick veil, doubtless used to protect her eyes and lungs from the cloud of dust and dirt lifted by the flying wheels and blown through the coach. She was dressed in a traveling suit, with a linen duster over all. She occupied the rear seat, her two companions the forward one facing her.

"It will be two o'clock, our driver says, before we reach our destination," one of the men remarked, as they jolted and rumbled along.

"Indeed!" exclaimed the woman, in a soft, girlish voice. "I felt in hopes we'd not have to travel in the night."

"Why Vida," replied the younger of the men, "you are not getting afraid now, are you, after traveling this far, and the worst of the dangers are passed?"

"There are great dangers yet," Vida answered, in a sweet, musical voice. "You know we have always heard that Virginia City and the surrounding country were infested with lawless characters that prey on the innocent and defenseless."

"Our driver assures me there is no need of fears on that score," replied the elder man.

"He is very extravagant of assertions, father, as well as of oaths and language unbecoming a gentleman."

"Tut, tut, my child," protested the father. "You would scarcely dare say so much of him at the station. Stage drivers always have had a lien upon the admiration of their associates, no difference how low and debased. Their profanity and vulgar sayings are taken in as readily as though every word and oath was the embodiment of wit and humor."

The conversation was here interrupted by the stage stopping in front of a long, low cabin, in the rear of which were stabling and other buildings, indicative of a way-station for relays. The halt was only for a few minutes, long enough for the driver to change horses, or rather to have it done.

At this point two more passengers were taken aboard. One was an old man with gray hair and whiskers, but firm, elastic step. The other was a young man of prepossessing appearance. The former got inside the coach, and the latter mounted the box with the driver.

Then the coach rolled away.

The old man proved a very communicative and agreeable companion. He resided at Carson City, was well acquainted at Virginia City, and with all the surrounding country. He set aside all fears of danger by assuring his companions that there were no road-agents along that part of the route.

Quick, the driver, and his young companion became quite agreeable—as much so, at least, as was consistent with the dignity of James Bartholomew Quick. The traveler passed his cigar-case, and, not to be outdone in hospitality by such an in-

significant youth, James passed his ancient friend—his bottle. With these sociable indulgences they entered into conversation.

The driver asked no questions that would imply a want of knowledge, but answered all that were put to him with an air of vain importance.

"How long have you been on this route?" the passenger finally ventured to inquire.

"Three or four years, I believe," was James' reply, given in a careless, off-hand way.

"Are you much acquainted in Virginia City?"

"I think so," with a smile.

"How far is it to the City?"

"We'll," drawled James, "twenty or thirty miles."

"Quite a ways yet; especially for my old friend, who has had a tedious day's travel. We were afraid we would not be in time at Hurricane Station to catch you, so we hurried up and were nearly blown when we reached the station."

"You've been out prospecting, of course," suggested Quick, evading a direct question.

"Yes, for the trail of some of those fellows that's been troubling you old stagers."

"Indeed? Then you are vigilantes, eh?" said Quick, growing somewhat easier under the conviction that he might be entertaining a man of some note. He passed his bottle again immediately, this time out of the spirit of sociability, and, from that moment on, the two "spirits" of the man began to flow with their characteristic ease and smoothness.

"Stage-driving and the detective business," he said, gathering up the reins in a firmer grasp, "are among the most dangerous callings of the day, stranger; and, if I do say it myself, none but the courageous venture to engage in them. The difference in staging and your business is this: a driver has the responsibility of a team and their proper guidance, upon which always depend more or less human lives; while a detective has only himself to look after in case of trouble. Even now, should a shower of Indian arrows assail us, I would be in duty bound to stick to these ribbons to save the stage and those within, while you could jump off and run for it and it'd be nobody's business. I would have made a good detective, stranger, but there isn't quite excitement enough in it for me. My spiritual organization requires a great deal of stirring excitement. To be a good detective, in this country a thorough knowledge of the topography of the place is absolutely necessary. Moreover, a knowledge of human nature is required. But I'll bet a month's wages that I know this country over and over, better'n any man in Nevada. I've been out before, stranger," and the driver rounded off his period with a grand flourish and crack of his long whip.

"You ought to be on our force, driver," said the passenger, in such an earnest tone that Quick failed to detect the sarcasm in it.

"If they'd pay me according to my ability, I might venture to try them awhile."

"Suppose I recommend you at headquarters."

"I've no objection," and the whip put in the usual period.

By this time it was dusk and objects were growing very indistinct. The road was rough and stony, the iron tires of the wheels grinding and crunching along with a direful sound that started the echoes of the young night.

They finally descended into a lonely, desolate valley, on either side of which towering walls of gray rock shot upward into the sky. Every ray of light was excluded from their way. It seemed as though no one could follow such a course in such Egyptian gloom. But all trusted to the superior knowledge and nerve of their driver. James Quick was conscious of the trust and honor reposed in him, and felt an inward delight over the fact.

Slowly the coach crept along the black defile. The wheels sliding, ground the fire from the stony road. The huge springs creaked and groaned like things possessed. The coach swayed and tipped violently.

Suddenly the coach stopped. The low sound of voices was heard in advance.

The old detective put his head out at the door and demanded:

"What's the matter, driver?"

"Shut up," was the response from a strange voice.

"Friends," said the old man excitedly, "we have been stopped by road-agents—robbers! If you have any valuables, conceal them quick."

The girl uttered a little cry of alarm.

"Pass me your jewels, Vida, or they will be torn from your person," said the father.

Vida removed her jewelry and reaching over placed the articles in her father's outstretched hand.

"I have not—" began the father, but he was interrupted by two masked men who, approaching the door, said:

"Passengers, keep your seats, and if you would avert bloodshed, don't offer the least resistance. There is an old man in here that we want—nothing else but 'hard-pan.'"

The robber opened a dark lantern and flashed its light into the coach.

"That's the man we want," the masked road-agent said, pointing to the old detective with his revolver. "You'll hop out now, old man, without a word, and go with us. We're here to take you, dead or alive."

"Climb out, old sleuth-hound!" cried another of the agents, and his words were repeated by a dozen others.

Without a word the old man got out and was led away.

"Now passengers," continued the leader of the band, turning his revolver upon the elder of the two men, "we'll trouble you for your valuables—be in a hurry, too."

"Excuse the lady from the demand, captain," said a voice at one side.

"The lady is excused," was the captain's generous order.

"Thank you, sir," was Vida's reply.

The men gave up their pocketbooks, watches and weapons. The robber-chief thanked them with mock politeness, then compelling the young detective in the boot to dismount, ordered the terrified James Quick to drive on, which order he was not slow in obeying.

As the coach rolled away the elder traveler said:

"Thank God we have been permitted to escape with our lives!"

"But we are financially ruined," said the other man, sadly.

"Yes; every dollar we had in the world is gone and all our hopes are blasted."

The girl burst into tears.

"Oh father! I was afraid of this," she sobbed. "Our escape from death is miraculous. Those road-agents were not violent men. Plunder, and not human life, seemed to have been their sole object; though, what they will do with that old man and his companion the Lord only knows. But as to our situation: what can we do now? We are ruined. Our enterprise will fall to the ground. The boys have no doubt got through with our outfit and are waiting our arrival; but when we get there what can we do without means?"

"Nothing," replied the other.

"Don't despair, father," said Vida; "a kind Providence permitted me to save my diamonds. They will bring a handsome price—sufficient to enable you to go on with your mining speculation. It is well they did not search you, or they would doubtless have got the jewels also."

"Vida, my child, I have not your jewels," replied the father.

"Why, yes father, you have, certainly. I placed them in your hand just as the robbers opened the door. I reached across and placed them in your open palm."

"It was not my palm, daughter."

"It was somebody's hand—an outstretched hand that I could not see in the dark; but I felt the hand—felt the fingers close upon the jewels before they were fairly out of mine."

"Daughter, there has been a serious mistake. In the darkness you placed them in that old man's hand. He heard me ask you for them. It was his voice that bade the robber excuse you, Vida, from giving up your valuables—I know it now. Fools that we have been! All is plain now, when it is too late. That old man was a robber—an accomplice of that gang—no doubt their leader. To him, my daughter, you gave your jewels."

Vida again burst into tears.

The stage rattled on through the darkness.

In silence sat the three passengers brooding over their loss.

At regular intervals the stinging crack of the driver's whip rung above the clatter of hoofs and rattle of wheels.

And rounding the towering foothills, the glimmer of a hundred lights burst suddenly upon the view, and a cry of joy escaped the lips of the travelers.

They were at their journey's end.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE DEN OF MOLOCK, THE WOLF-HERDER.

WILD DICK, the Boy Hunter, and his young companion, stood as if rooted to the spot with inward terror, when they beheld the mouth of the cavern closed behind them, and fully realized the magnitude of their danger.

They knew at once what had been the fate of Frank Caselton and Billy Brady.

Two men, followed by four gaunt, fierce-looking dogs, issued from the shadows of the wall near the mouth of the cavern.

"Stand!" yelled one of the men in a coarse, savage tone, "or by the gods of 'Lympus I'll sick the dogs on ye, and tear ye limb from limb."

Wild Dick knew that these men were certain of what they said—certain of their power over the two youths, and saw at once that resistance would be useless.

"It's no use to fight, Perry," he said; "the odds are against us. But if they were alone, I'd fight them both; but them wolfish-lookin' dogs are trained to their work. We may escape if we surrender—at least, it's our only hope."

"Do as you think best, Dick," answered Perry.

"Do you give up?" demanded one of the outlaws, for such they doubtless were.

"The numbers are against us, it is true," replied Dick, fearlessly; "but, what assurance have you to give us that we will be treated as humans—as boys who mean no one harm?"

"It's not for you to make conditions. We know our business and that we can gather you uns in, as we did a couple of your friends a while ago."

"We're not so easy gathered in as you might think, if we are boys. We can shoot you two down anyhow before your dogs reach us; but, strangers, we are peaceable boy hunters, and have no desire to shed human blood, however vile it may be. I think you are mistaken as to our object in comin' into your stronghold, and will give up in hopes of a peaceable understanding."

The two men advanced cautiously toward the boys, who gave up their weapons and then followed their captors toward the northern side of the valley.

A minute's walk brought them to a tall log house which stood under the towering cliff that formed the northern boundary of the valley. From the north-east corner of the house to the perpendicular wall of rock extended a kind of a stone fence nearly ten feet in height. Beyond this fence arose a low, snapping and snarling sound, as though a hundred hungry, quarrelsome dogs were herded there together.

A damp, sickish odor pervaded the air.

One of the men pushed open a ponderous door and led the way into the building. The room was lighted with a sputtering lamp.

It was poorly furnished with all else save weapons. It looked like an arsenal, and was as strongly built as a fortress. In one corner Dick and Perry saw the weapons of their friends, Frank and Billy.

One of the men, turning to the boys, said:

"My larks, you'll climb that ladder to your crib."

The boys ascended the ladder into the loft, their burly captor following them. At the head of the stairs was a door opening into an adjoining room. It was heavily barred and bolted. The door opened outward, and being unfastened by their captor and opened, Dick and Perry were shoved into the room—the door closed and barred upon them.

"Och! and by the sweet Vargin, and here's our b'ys now!" were the words that greeted Dick and Perry as they entered their prison.

Frank and Billy were imprisoned there.

"You're here, are you, boys?" called out Dick, unable to see his friends for the darkness that pervaded the place.

"Yes; we have all been caught in the same trap," responded Frank. "God only knows what'll become of us—what our enemies intend to do with us."

"Nothing human, I dare say," said Dick; "we are in the clutches of villains—robbers who will never let us go to visit vengeance upon them. No, boys, we need entertain no hopes of mercy or liberty—we're elected."

"There is no possible chance of escape," declared Frank. "I have explored this room thoroughly. I found a little air-hole on the north side, but you can scarcely get your head through it. The roof at the lowest point is all of twelve feet from the floor. The whole structure is strong as a felon's cell."

"I wonder what time it can be?" asked Perry.

"Nighly morning, I should think," answered Dick.

"When daylight comes we can see what show we have for escape. We might overpower our guard when he brings us something to eat."

"S'pose he don't bring us anything?"

"Why, then the jig will be up with us," replied Perry; "we've to suffer a little for getting, open-eyed, into such a fix."

"It was a careless piece of business," acknowledged Dick, "but we'll have to make the best of it now. These men are the same that were abroad last night on tame buffaloes. I saw two of the animals as I came up across the valley; and the third one with a rider passed Perry and I in the cavern."

"They are outlaws and robbers, no doubt, of the vilest character."

"B'ys," put in Billy Brady, "it's no use whinin' over shpilt milk, and we moight as well dance as cry," and suiting the action to the word, Billy sprung to his feet and clipped off an Irish jig that made the loft floor fairly rattle, and the outlaws below swear with rage.

The noise created by the youth started a fearful snarling and howling of wolfish voices outside, under the little window or "air-hole" mentioned by Frank.

The boys held their breath and listened.

"What is making that noise, Dick?" inquired young Caselton.

"It must be a pack of hungry dogs, though it sounds more like wolves."

"It's a wonder the place has never been found before, if it harbors robbers and cut-throats."

"Perhaps it has been found, but the finder never escaped to tell the story."

"That may be," sighed Frank.

Daylight soon came, and dispelled the gloom from the prison. Only a few shadows lingered.

The boys could now take in the situation without trouble. The walls were of solid logs with no opening save the one little window about six inches square. The roof was beyond their reach; escape from the apartment was utterly impossible.

Frank finally went to the little window and looked out. He recoiled with a cry of surprise and a shudder of terror. A hundred pairs of blazing eyes, and half that number of hungry-looking faces looked up at him.

"Good Lord! look out there, boys!" he exclaimed.

Wild Dick stepped to the window and looked out. He saw a long, narrow pen, one end of which was formed by the cabin wall, the other by the great stone wall that shut in the valley. The sides were made of stone and built to the height of ten feet or more. And in this pen he beheld a hundred grim, gaunt wolves of all sizes, ranging from the large, shaggy male to the pup of a few months.

"Jews and Gentiles!" exclaimed Dick. "Boys, I'm afraid we are doomed. I know, now, where we are!"

"Indeed?" cried Frank.

"Yes, we are in the den of Molock, the Wolf-Herder—a human fiend!"

CHAPTER XV.

PRISON HOURS—A THUMP ON THE ROOF.

THE name of Molock, the Wolf, or the Wolf-Herder, was nothing new to the ears of our little party. But that such a being actually existed, none of them believed. The name was supposed to be traditionary among the Indian tribes. It seemed impossible that a human being could be so infamously cruel as the Wolf-Herder was reputed to be—far more rapacious in human sacrifice than his ancient namesake, Molock, the chief god of the Ammorites.

"Do you actually believe there is such a person as Molock is represented to be, Dick?" Frank finally asked.

"In course I do; and we're in his clutches, too. There is his herd, jowerin' beneath our window—clamoring for our flesh to feed their ravenous maws."

"I have heard of the name, but always supposed it a myth."

"It is not a myth, that I know, although I have never been in this place, nor even in this vicinity before."

"I have heard that he feeds his enemies to his wolves as a sacrifice to the god of the mountain."

"I reckon it's so, that he feeds folks to his wolves, but whether it is to appease the insatiable wrath of the mountain god, or his own unnatural monstrosity, I can't say; that he does feed human beings to the beasts, I am certain, and if you'll look out yonder near the base of the cliff in the pen, you'll see human bones."

A human skull and bones that were plainly visible to all, bore frightful evidence of the horrible fact.

The boys shuddered and grew pale. They took turns gazing out upon the fierce herd of snarling beasts, as if actuated in so doing by some horrible fascination.

The pen was under the mighty ledge that projected outward fully forty feet. A stone dropped from the edge of the cliff above, would not have missed the house more than twenty feet.

While the boys stood watching the herd, they saw two men pass out from the house with something in their arms. It proved to be meat which they tossed over the stone fence into the wolf-pen to the hungry pack. Like a wave the beasts surged in upon the spot where the first strip of meat fell—fighting, tumbling and howling—a living vortex of shaggy forms.

Strip after strip of meat the men threw over, until each beast had been provided, and all had become quiet.

"Well, what can be the object in this business, Dick?" asked Frank.

"Why, money, bless you—but hark! there is some one coming."

The door was opened and Molock himself entered the room with some bits of cold meat on a dirty tin pan. His face was bruised and swollen from the effects of the blow given him, a few nights previous, by the old trapper, Zedekiah Dee.

"Here's sumthin' for you young white vagabonds to eat," he said, in a gruff, surly tone.

"You are very considerate, I am sure," said Frank, a little sarcastically.

"Oh, yes, to be sure; I want ye to keep fat, and if ye want to know why, jist look out at that winder and see the mouths I have to feed. Meat's scarce—very scarce."

"Arrah, man!" exclaimed Billy, "and the bastes are the divil's own children, and yees must be the owld b'y, himself."

"I want none of your sass, bogtrotter, or I'll tumble you right out into the pen forthwith. I'm desprit when I git sot agoin'—all natur' couldn't hold me. If you young varmints hadn't a-set your noses up here whar I've not been disturbed fur years, you'd not 'a' got yerselves into this muss. If it wasn't fur one thing, you mout git off with yer hair; but then I know a thing or two. You are the very larks that pitched into us t'other night at ole Zed Dee's cabin, when I war tryin' to git a hold on that infurnal Idaho Tom. You're some of that young scape-gallows' friends, and I—"

"Yees are mishtaken, ould sorrel-top," put in Billy, looking aslant at the desperado.

"Don't cross me, Irish brat," warned the man with a threatening frown. "I know you war there."

"We never seen yees afore, and it's a blasted liar ye are if ye say different."

Molock slapped Billy in the face.

The youth dropped to the floor as if under the force of the blow, but, planting himself upon his hands, whirled his feet through the air and drove them squarely, and with violent force, in the outlaw's brutal face. Like an ox stricken in the shambles, the man went down, the cabin fairly trembling under the shock.

With an oath that was fairly hissed between his set teeth, the man sprung to his feet with the determination of "extarminat-in' the cussed varmint;" but the attitude assumed by Billy's friends caused him to change his intentions. With a scowl of vengeance he turned upon his heel and went out, banged the door shut and locked it.

"To the divil wid yees, ould bla'guard," shouted Billy at the top of his lungs.

"I am afraid this affair will tighten the cords around us," said Frank, regretfully. "It appears that the old villain accuses us of complicity in some fight, in which he was doubtless worsted; and it will be impossible now to convince him otherwise. He will retaliate for your kick, Billy. He is a desperate man, that all can see; and I daresay he will carry out his threat, and consign us to the wolf-pen."

"If he undertakes to remove one of us, we must all pitch into him," announced Wild Dick. "Let us die together, if die it is. We might overpower him and his friends both. Them tarnal dogs are the worst enemies. But, boys, let's eat this grub. It'll keep up strength, and that's the great essential in our case."

"Maybe it's poisoned," suggested Perry.

"Can't see any gain in that, if it is. If we'd die of poison and he'd throw us into the pen, it'd kill his wolves, don't you see? It's not poisoned, boys; come on."

They all sat down to partake of the meager repast.

"Now, as I war goin' to say, when that feller come in," said Dick, helping himself to the half-cooked meat, "Molock makes this wolf-raisin' a payin' business—"

"Oh, yes, let's hear about that."

"Well you see that it costs very little to raise wolves here in

the mountains where game of all kinds is plenty; and then it's no trouble to raise a litter of young. As soon as they've got their growth, which they'll attain in from eight to twelve months, they are slain, and the scalp and peltry taken off. The peltries are ready sale at two dollars each at any of the tradin' posts. Then each scalp, which consists of the top of the head and the ears, is worth all the way from two to five dollars, accordin' to the State they're sold in. This part is a cheat and a swindle on the State government. California for instance, offers four dollars for the scalp of every wolf killed within the State; so you see it'll be an easy matter for Molock to raise a hundred scalps, take them over to California, and by swearin' that they were taken inside the State limits, why, in course, he'll git the bounty. I've known men to kill wolves in one territory and get the bounty on the scalps in another territory, or State, by swearin' to a lie; but I never knowed any one but Molock to raise wolves for that purpose. In course, it's easier to raise 'em, and hunt game to feed 'em, than to hunt the wild wolves. So you see he can make from six to eight dollars a head. Suppose he has twenty-five females, and each of them raises five cubs. That'd make a hundred and twenty-five head, which'd bring him a thousand dollars: and all that it would cost him besides his time, would be a little for powder and lead to shoot game to feed 'em."

"Yes, yes; I see now," replied Frank; "it is a nefarious business—one that he will not give up to save our lives. He will put us out of the way of doing him harm, depend upon it."

"B'ys, if yees 'll jist boost me up a little, I'll try to raise the roof and git out." Billy evidently was ready for operations.

"You can't reach the roof from the shoulders of the tallest boy here, Billy," declared Perry, measuring the distance from the roof to the floor with his eye.

"Well, we can try," said Frank, and as soon as they had finished their repast, he assisted Billy to his shoulder. The young Celt stood erect, balancing himself against the wall. He reached upward, but lacked several inches of being able to touch the roof.

"Too short in the middle," the youth exclaimed, turning a hand-spring backward from Frank's shoulders, and landing in the middle of the floor with a thump that shook the whole house.

There were no hopes of escape unless it lay in overpowering the guard and fighting their way out.

"I presume we are doomed to the Wolf-Herder's will," Frank finally admitted, half desponding.

"God knows whether we are to die or not in this valley. If He has so ordained, no earthly power will save us," replied Wild Dick, with deep earnestness.

A sudden commotion had arisen among the wolves; and Frank walked to the window and looked out.

An exclamation escaped his lips. To and fro between the towering cliff and the cabin, and directly over the wolf-pen, he saw a large round object oscillating like a mighty pendulum. It was suspended in mid-air by a slender cord passing over the edge of the heights above. The outlines of a human were about the form, but it was drawn up in a ball, and like a huge spider swayed to and fro in the wind on its gossamer thread.

"What does it mean?" Dick asked, curiously.

"Some deviltry of the Wolf Herder," replied Frank; "it is probably an example of our coming fate, for that is certainly a human form at the end of that rope—a human possessed of life."

The object continued swaying to and fro, each oscillation growing longer and longer.

Our friends watched it with bated breath, for they could not conceive the faintest idea of what it meant. But suddenly—as the ball swung toward the cabin—it left the end of the cord to which it was attached, and shot rapidly through the air like a panther on the spring.

A dull thump upon the roof told the boys where the ball had landed.

A deathlike silence pervaded the prison-room, and the prisoners exchanged inquiring looks as they listened with bated breath. They heard a sound as though boards were being removed from the roof. And so it was; an opening was soon made through which the sunlight streamed into the prison room.

The opening grew larger, as shingle after shingle was removed.

A hole, large enough to admit the body of a man, was soon made.

Still no one was visible, but the end of a knotted rope suddenly appeared through the opening and was lowered to the floor. This was followed by a pair of moccasined feet, a pair of legs

incased in buck-skin, and the shoulders and head of an Indian who slipped down the rope and stood on the floor before the astonished boys.

A cry of surprise burst from every lip. It was the Indian boy, Bold Heart, that confronted them!

CHAPTER XVI.

LIVELY TIMES AT THE WOLF-PEN.

"BOLD HEART, by Judas!" exclaimed Frank Cassleton, in astonishment.

"How's this, old pard?" asked Wild Dick, both pleased and surprised by his appearance there.

"Blame my eyes if they don't see a traitor!" put in Billy, rubbing his optics as though he doubted what he saw.

"Bold Heart is still the friend of the pale-faces," the Indian said, with his old-time gravity, and speaking of himself in that true Indian way, the third person. "He has come to save you. Nearly all of the bad pale-face men who live here, have gone away. Bold Heart followed them a long ways. When they stop to talk, then Bold Heart creep up—hear 'um talk. Only one man left below, hear 'um say. That tickled Bold Heart. Then he more tickled when he heard 'um say white boys were here. Go steal three long lariats then—tie 'um together—make long rope—tie one end to tree on cliff—slip down rope—then swing, swing over wolf-pen and drop dab on wigwam-roof. Waigh! Bold Heart here now—proud Ingin."

All readily understood this brief, disjointed story, for all had seen the daring youth swinging in mid-air over the wolf-pen—saw him spring through space, when he had gained momentum sufficient to carry him to the roof. But why he had run all this risk after deserting them and joining the foe, seemed a little strange to the boys.

"We saw your daring feat, Bold Heart," said Dick; "but what surprises me the most is your coming here after deserting us."

"Didn't desert," was the laconic reply.

"What did you leave us for, then?"

"Me go to git 'em," said the youth, drawing a greasy pack of cards from the bosom of his hunting-shirt; "jist git 'em all picked up where Billy-boy scatter 'em, when bad Ingins come and catch me—take off my clothes—one put 'em on—look like me—jump up on stone and shout much loud—make you believe him me. But me git away—hide in bushes—hear ole wolf-man talk—hear him tell all 'bout you."

"I thought it strange, Bold Heart," said Dick, "that you'd desert us; but now I see through it all. I believe every word you have told us, and hope I'll never have occasion to suspect you of treachery again."

"Begob, and yess are a jewil, Bold Heart, me b'y; but, how the nashin are wees going to git out av this hole?" demanded Billy.

"Climb rope—climb way up on top of rock," responded the Indian, proudly.

"But suppose the man whom you say is below, should discover and shoot us?"

"Tend to him first—now," was the rejoinder, and seizing the dangling rope, the Indian youth glided up to the roof, hand-over-hand, like a sailor. Billy, who had spent years at sea, and had not forgotten his learning, nor lost any of his dexterity in climbing a rope, followed Bold Heart's example, and scampered up the slender cord to the roof, with remarkable ease.

The Indian made no objection to the brave lad's company, and drawing up the rope from the room, he dropped it over the eve of the roof, when he and Billy carefully lowered themselves to the ground.

Bold Heart was provided with a hatchet and pair of revolvers. The latter he gave to Billy; and, thus armed, the two crept around the house and entered the building.

The man left to guard the place lay upon the floor in a half-drunken sleep; and by his side crouched four fierce-looking hounds that might have been a cross between the wolf and bloodhound.

The dogs started up as the boys entered, and manifested a disposition to dispute further intrusion. Their growling awoke the man, who, rising to a sitting posture, bade them be still, before he could fully take in the situation.

This gave the boys an advantage that proved the death of the outlaw. Bold Heart sprang forward and dealt him a blow that felled him to the floor. Then the Indian youth sprang quickly

up the ladder, and was followed by Billy. This latter movement was made to escape the fangs of the dogs, which now charged upon them.

Fortunately they succeeded in gaining the loft with no other damage than that sustained by the seat of Billy's pantaloons.

Seating himself upon the top round of the ladder, and leaning his elbows on his knees, the young Celt amused himself by emptying chamber after chamber of his revolver at the dogs that were making frantic efforts to tear him from his perch. Nearly every shot either killed or wounded, and by the time the second weapon had been half emptied, the dogs all lay dead beside their master.

This left the coast entirely clear. Bold Heart unfastened the door and set his friends at liberty, when all went below and began an exploration of the house. They found all of their weapons, which they at once secured. Then they broke into the larder and helped themselves to what they could find. They rummaged the house over and over, in search of all the evidence they could obtain of the unlawful deeds of the Wolf-Herder. They found many things that went to establish the fact that the place was the rendezvous of a band of robbers, as well as the stronghold of the Wolf-Herder. In a little rose-wood box, inlaid with pearl, that Frank found under a pallet of furs in one corner, was a set of lady's jewelry of inestimable worth.

"There is no doubt some dark secret connected with this jewelry," Frank said; "my heart shudders to think of what suffering and torture some fair one—the owner of these jewels—might have undergone in the power of the demon Molock. I shall take these diamonds; not that I want them myself, but in hopes that they may be restored to their owner; and if that owner is dead, that they may tell to anxious, waiting friends the secret of the beloved one's disappearance."

After the Boy Hunters had fully satisfied their curiosity as to the nature of the place, a short consultation was held to consider the best way out of the rock-girded valley.

One would propose this way, and another that, but as no two could agree upon the same plan, it was finally left for Bold Heart to say how their escape from the valley should be made, since he had displayed such cunning and courage in getting into the stronghold.

"Climb rope to top of cliff—draw up rope, then robbers never know how we get away," was the quick decision of the referee.

All proceeded to act upon this decision at once. The little party hastily ascended to the roof of the house, when the shingles, removed by Bold Heart, were all carefully replaced.

The preliminaries for the ascent of the cliff having been arranged, Bold Heart proposed to go up first.

It was thirty feet or more from the roof to the top of the cliff, and all of twenty from the house to a perpendicular line with the point where the rope hung over the edge of the shelving heights. This made it necessary, in the first place, to swing off the roof before beginning the ascent, and also made it a dangerous undertaking for those not so skillful in climbing the rope as were Billy Brady and Bold Heart.

The quick, inventive mind of Bold Heart, however, soon conceived an idea that would entirely overcome this difficulty. An additional rope, or lariat, was procured from the room below and attached to the end of the other. This made the slender ladder long enough for one remaining on the roof to let the rope with its burden slowly out until it came to a rest.

Bold Heart grasped the rope and was eased off the roof by Frank, who held the check-rope; and as soon as the Indian youth came to a rest, he began climbing up the rope with cat-like ease and rapidity.

In half a minute he stood upon the top of the ledge—safe.

Frank drew the rope back to the roof and Perry went next. His ascent was attended with some difficulty, and at one time all hopes of his reaching the top were given up by those below. But the boy was plucky, and struggling onward and upward with a brave heart, he finally succeeded in reaching the summit of the ledge; but now that the danger was over, there came a reaction and he fell faint at the feet of Bold Heart.

Frank went next and Wild Dick followed him. Then their weapons were all attached to the rope and drawn up.

Billy was the only one now upon the roof, and the rope being returned to him, he grasped it and swung off the house. For full a minute he swung to and fro over the wolf-pen, every sway of his body being watched by a hundred pairs of hungry, burning eyes below; but, as soon as he came to a rest, the youth ran up the rope with the ease of a born sailor.

The little band were safe once more; and to Bold Heart's

fearlessness, cunning and bravery did Billy, Frank, Dick and Perry owe their lives.

Drawing up the rope and concealing it in case of future need, the Boy Hunters shouldered their rifles and marched away toward Lake Tahoe.

CHAPTER XVII.

LOVE MESSAGES.

THE birds of morning sung their sweetest songs, and the cool, fresh breeze came laden with the rich breath of the pine forest.

The cabin of the Mad Trapper, alone in the mountain vale, showed no signs of recent habitation save in the thin white column of smoke curling lazily up from the capacious chimney. The door was closed; the windows barred, and the whole pervaded with an air of silent desolation.

Buzzards wheeled in the air overhead—rising and falling in spiral circles, their naked coral necks outstretched, and their eyes fixed on the valley, as though by instinct they knew the prevailing silence boded the presence of death—something upon which to feast their filthy maws.

Idaho Tom, the Outlaw of Silverland, noted all this from his concealment on the northern bluff overlooking the valley, and a vague feeling of horror seized upon him.

"Something is wrong at the cabin of the Mad Trapper," the youth mused to himself. "The silence of death broods over and around all. I hadn't ought to leave here without first inquiring into the mystery that hangs over the cabin; nor I won't. But I will run down to the lake first. If she is well and safe, how thankful I will be!"

So saying, he passed from his concealment, and keeping around to the left of the cabin, moved briskly down to Lake Tahoe. He never paused until he stood upon the northern shore of Silver Bay.

Wildly beat his heart with joy, when he caught sight of the floating island; and wilder still beat the pulses when he caught a glimpse of a female form among the green shrubbery upon that island.

"Oh! if I could be permitted to speak but one word to her," the young outlaw sighed, "one word to her—the idol of my heart! I must let her know by some means or other that I am near. I will make a fool of myself in doing so, but I can't help it, if I lose all. Perhaps some would call this a boyish infatuation—Jack Hill does, come to think. They say all boys of my age are fools in their first love, and I reckon that's what's ailing me. But, I'll send her a token of my—my—yes, by the ghost of Caesar—my love!"

He started around the bay in order to get the wind fair against the island. As he went along he gathered some light twigs and wove and tangled them into a kind of a wicker basket. This he lined with flakes of moss plucked from the tree-trunks. Then he gathered some wild flowers and arranged them into a tasteful bouquet, and this he placed in the basket along with a slip of paper upon which he had written with a pencil, these words:

"For the Lady of the Isle, from her friend, who is very desirous of some token of her respect. IDAHO TOM."

Tom placed the basket on the water, freighted with its message of love. The wind drove it slowly out upon the bosom of the beautiful bay, straight toward the little island.

The youth threw himself beneath the umbrageous boughs of a great pine to watch the passage of the little craft across the waters that separated him from his heart's idol.

An hour went by. To the impatient boy it seemed as though the drifting message-boat would never reach its destination.

Suddenly it occurred to him that if his note was answered by the same little transport, he would have to find it on the opposite shore, for the wind would drive it south of the island.

Feeling as though his hopes must be realized, he arose and made his way around the lake to a point due south of the island. Here he waited and watched for fully another hour, and his heart gave a great throb of joy when he discovered a little white object flutter out from the island and drift rapidly toward him. With bated breath and distended eyes, the youth watched its approach.

As it came nearer, he saw that it was his own little craft of twigs and leaves to which had been attached a snowy little sail made of a white handkerchief.

Idaho Tom could scarcely restrain his emotions of joy—hardly wait till the little sail touched shore with the longed-for missive.

He whistled and danced to keep down the exuberance of spirit that threatened to burst forth in joyous demonstrations.

Gaily the little craft sailed down with the wind, bearing its Cupid arrow aboard, while to and fro beneath the branches of a great pine paced the impatient boy.

At length the little sail "put into harbor," and with a single bound Tom stood at the water's brink by the tiny boat of twigs.

His eyes caught sight of a neatly folded paper lying in it. Snatching it up, he retreated into the shade and unfolded a delicate missive, written in a neat hand, and read thus:

"Your note, Mr. Idaho Tom, came duly to hand, three cents postage due. Accept my thanks for the bouquet. To you I owe a debt of gratitude that I can never repay. My best wishes for your safety and pleasure are all that I can extend to you. ZOE."

Tom fairly danced with joy. He read and re-read the note. It was written in the unmistakable hand of a woman—there was no deception about it.

"And Zoe is her name," he mused, "a real pretty name too; but now, another question arises—one thing leads to another. What secret is connected with that island?—what mystery with yonder canoe? Is it anything that will prevent me from boarding that island?—from ever standing face to face with Zoe?"

Thus musing he spent an hour by the shore; but being suddenly reminded that time was passing rapidly, he stepped down to the water's brink, and lifting the little craft from the water, concealed it in a clump of manzanitas.

"Rest there, little boat, till I come again. You have borne to me a treasure worth more than all the gold of the Pacific shore; and I may want you to go again with love's message to the island."

He turned and moved around the bay and away toward the cabin of the Mad Trapper. When he came in sight of the cabin, he paused and scanned the valley and the lonely hut.

There was still no sign of life about; that same deathlike solitude brooded over the valley like the angel of death.

"Something is wrong there, sure as the sun shines. And it wouldn't be right for me to leave without looking into the matter. It's singular they don't know all about it down at the lake, for I know they are related, in some way or other. But then, maybe they do—maybe they have deserted the cabin for good, and all gone to the lake. I do wonder where I could find old Zedekiah Dee, the trapper?"

"Here I be, right here my young kid," was the response of a familiar voice behind him, and the Mad Trapper stepped from a covert of bushes and confronted the youth.

"By George, trapper, I am monstrous glad to see you!" exclaimed Tom; "how's times?"

"Magnumbonum, Thomas Idaho," was the trapper's response; "most confoundedly lively, Idaho—skittish as a blind horse in fly-time, or a nigger in a hornet's nest. How's your pulse been a-throbbin' since the night of that little affair, Thomas?"

"Two hundred to the minute."

"Livin' purty fast then, arn't ye? Crowding three years into one. Well, so jogs the world along, Tom, my gay young vagabond."

"This is a fast age, trapper; but it does seem to me that it's looking dull around your cabin."

"I've been sayin' so fur some time. I left early this mornin', and when I hove to in that bush two minutes ago, something struck me under the scalp as being wrong. I don't know why I think so, Tom, but I am goin' to see about it. Won't you go down?"

"I will, certainly."

The two descended the bluff, crossed the valley and approached the cabin. At the door they paused and listened. All was still within. The Mad Trapper pulled the latch-string, opened the door and cautiously entered the cabin.

"Jews an' Gentiles! Lord of Israel, preserve me!" burst from the lips of the old borderman, as his eyes fell upon two forms—two human forms—seated before the fire-place.

Both were white men. They were seated upon chairs, or rather tied there, with their faces turned toward the fire. Their hands hung idly over their knees. Their chins rested upon their breasts. One of them held an empty pipe in one hand, while the other held a slip of paper.

"Asleep, are they, Zed?" said Tom; "been out on a social drunk?"

The trapper shook his head, gravely, then he spoke to the two men, but they stirred not. He laid his hand upon one's shoulder and shook him, or tried to, for the man was stark and stiff.

"They're both dead, Tom," the trapper said, in a low, husky tone. "This is the hellish work of that fiend incarnate, Molock."

"Do you know them, friend trapper?"

"They're friends," responded Zed, in a rather evasive manner; "but, read that, Tom," he continued, taking the slip of paper from the dead man's hand and passing it to the youth.

"Vengeance is mine!" he read aloud.

"Is that all?"

"That's all; but it's a miserable scrawl."

"It's Molock's work. Poor boys! they're gone under forever. They're done tollin' here, and their death will be a terrible blow to—to me. They've been away up to Virginia City for several days, and jist got home yesterday. Curses on that Molock! I will hunt him and his Ingins as I would a deer."

Tom removed the hats from the heads of the two lifeless men, and gazed upon their ghastly faces. Instantly he recognized them as the two strangers he and Jack Hill had played with at the "Optir Exchange"—the very same men who had won his diamond ring, and whom Hill had declared were detectives. But of these facts he said nothing to the trapper.

The old borderman was grievously afflicted with the death of his friends. Tears trickled down his sunburned cheeks from eyes that seemed to have been wrung dry by long years of isolation from aught that would stir a feeling of tenderness in the human heart.

With the assistance of Tom, the dead were prepared for burial.

Under a stately pine in the valley, two graves were dug; and in the gathering twilight of a glorious summer evening the two men were put away to their final rest.

And all the while the Mad Trapper was sorrowful and silent. He spoke of the men in no way whatever, nor did Tom question him, for he saw that the old man's lips were sealed concerning the two dead friends.

Darkness had fallen ere the two returned to the cabin. Wolves had begun their mournful howling away off in the mountains. The towering hills came out in bold relief against the blue, starry sky, and the somber pines rustled their drapery like the shrouds of the dead.

CHAPTER XVIII.

DANGER AHEAD.

THE sun had just crossed the meridian when five persons appeared on the south-eastern shore of Silver Bay, and, pausing, swept the glassy sheet before them with an admiring, enthusiastic gaze.

They were our young friends—the heroes of the Wolf-Herder's ranch—the Boy Hunters.

"For the first time I behold the wonderful Tahoe!" exclaimed Frank, with a flourish of his hand.

"Mother av Moses, and isn't she a r'ale beauty, though?" added Billy Brady, his eyes distending with delight.

"Magnificent—grand!" put in Perry, his whole face beaming with a smile of admiration.

"Och, me love! and it's a perfect swate darlint of a little uck-pond," again gushed the irrepressible William Brady.

"Over yonder you can see that floating island of which I have been tellin' you," said Wild Dick.

"I see an island, but one would naturally suppose it was stationary—a natural island."

"There's no wind to move it now, but by to-morrow morning, or even by night, it may be rods from where it now is."

"There's something queer as well as romantic about the island."

"I've always said so, Frank," responded Wild Dick, "but how would you like a row out on the bosom of Tahoe?"

"I would like it very much indeed, if we only had a canoe."

"There's an old leaky concern around here a little ways. After awhile we'll take a row in that, for I want to show you something else—the men that inhabit this lake like fish—actually live in the water and walk about upon the bottom of the lake as you and I walk upon the earth."

"Preposterous, Dick," said Frank.

"Well, we'll see," was the Boy Hunter's good-natured response.

They moved around the lake-shore until they came to where the canoe, spoken of by Dick, was concealed under some trailing willows. It was a crazy old affair, dangerous for more than two to venture out in; but Wild Dick was so anxious to convince Frank of the truth of what he had been telling him, that these two youths at once embarked in the craft, leaving the other three to await their return.

As they glided out upon the deep, young Caselton became enraptured with the almost ethereal beauty of the element beneath them. He leaned over the side of the boat and gazed steadily down into its transparent depths.

"This is grand, glorious, Dick!" he cried, enthusiastically. "I have often heard of the clearness of Tahoe's waters, but could not fully credit the report. Now I find it even more grand than I had anticipated. This lake is a wonderful freak of nature, Dick."

"Yes, it is, Frank; but now look out. It was right about here that I seen them critters two weeks ago."

Frank kept a close watch down in the deep. Dick paddled hither and thither, all the while working well in toward the floating island which, for the time being, had been forgotten by Frank.

Suddenly the latter started up with an exclamation of surprise.

"There, by heaven!" he cried.

"See 'em?" was the cool interrogation of Dick.

"I see something as true as I can see at all; and, by heavens! it's a man—a living being!—walking upon the bottom of the lake. He is dressed in a queer sort of armor."

Wild Dick ceased paddling, and leaning over the side of the boat gazed down into the deep, and there upon the lake saw what Frank did.

The water at this point was not over twenty feet deep, and so there could be no mistake as to what they saw. Upon the rocky bed of the bay stood a living man, or a creature so nearly resembling a man clad in armor, that the youths felt satisfied that it was a human being possessed of some supernatural power.

The strange creature, whatever it was, seemed fully cognizant of the attention it attracted. It stopped, and raising its face upward stared at them with its great, glassy eyes until a feeling of horrible fascination appeared to fix the gaze and hold the tongues of the two boys.

It was a mystery far beyond the comprehension of the young hunters; and while they sat contemplating the same, a faint call reached their ears.

Both started up and involuntarily glanced toward the island. A cry of surprise burst from each one's lips. On the southern extremity they saw a young girl standing, waving a white handkerchief above her head.

They were not over a hundred yards from her, and could easily see that she was looking toward them and gesticulating in a manner that denoted excitement.

"What does it mean?" Each of the youths asked himself the question while he sat with his eyes fixed upon the female form on the island.

A fascination about the girl held the youths enchanted. She was dressed in a robe of sky-blue material which contrasted well with her white throat and rosy cheeks. Her long hair hung loose at her back and floated out on the breeze like silken skeins of gossamer.

In one hand she held the handkerchief that she had been waving, and in the other a small field-glass.

"Look! you are in danger!" she suddenly cried, in a clear, distinct voice, at the same time pointing away toward the peninsula that nearly separated the bay from the lake.

The boys looked in the direction indicated, and saw a canoe, with three Indians in it, coming up the strait toward them. It was not over two hundred yards away, and two of the savages were already getting their rifles into position for immediate use.

Dick seized the paddle with a view of putting distance between them and the foe, for the youths had left their rifles in care of their friends, and they were in a manner defenseless; but the first stroke was so vigorous that the old paddle was snapped in two, and the boys were left helpless and at the mercy of the approaching enemies; while the wind was driving them nearer and nearer the menacing danger.

"By Jerusalem, Frank! we're in a pickle," cried Dick. "We've got to jump out of this and swim for it, or die."

"Shall we make for the island?"

"Not by any means, Frank. That girl may be a siren luring us on still deeper into danger under pretense of—"

"I cannot think so, Dick," interrupted Frank. "She looks too much like an angel for that; but, suppose we try to escape ashore, will the foe not head us off?"

"The long-ranged rifles of our friends will cover our retreat."

"Then, go ahead, Dick, and I will follow you, though I perish in the attempt."

Dick sprung overboard and struck boldly out for the shore, swimming on his back. Frank arose to his feet and was about to follow, when a savage rifle rung out sharply over the water.

A cry burst from the youth's lips; he threw up his hands, and, staggering, fell backward into the lake—stricken down by a savage bullet!

CHAPTER XIX.

ZOE TO THE RESCUE.

WILD DICK knew nothing of his friend's mishap. The surge of the water around him as his lithe form cut its way through the element, drowned the report of the savage's rifle, and, supposing that Frank was close behind him, he pushed rapidly on toward the shore.

Frank's friends saw him fall from the canoe, but they were not the only ones. The maid upon the island also saw him stricken down. She had seen the paddle snap in two in Dick's hands, and at once read the peril of their situation. To relieve them was her first thought. To spring into a canoe moored in a little cove in the side of the island, take up the paddle and send the light craft skimming out into the bay, occupied the brief space of a few moments.

A few vigorous strokes of the paddle carried her alongside of the wounded, struggling youth. With an almost superhuman effort, in which she was but slightly aided by the youth himself, she succeeded in dragging him into the canoe, at the imminent peril of upsetting the craft. Then the brave little heroine paddled back to the island, on whose shore she was met by three armed men, whose rifles had covered her retreat.

Two of the men were middle-aged, while the third was past fifty.

A look of regret clouded the old man's face, as he gazed upon the unconscious youth in the canoe.

"Is he dead, Zoe?" he asked.

"No, father; I think he is only wounded," replied the maiden, in a tremulous voice, her eyes filling with tears.

The two young men lifted the form of the boy from the canoe, and carried him into a tent upon the island. Placing him upon a cot there, they turned and went out.

"I'm afraid it's all up with him, Hubert," one of them said to the old man, whom they met at the door.

Hubert Leland went into the tent, and kneeling by the youth, examined his pulse. Then he searched for his wound.

"Is he dead, father?" eagerly inquired Zoe, who stood in the doorway, breathlessly awaiting her father's decision.

"Dead!—no, child; far from it. His wound is but a mere scratch upon the temple. But he is the worse of his struggle in the water. Another minute and he would have been dead by drowning. Daughter, bring me some brandy and a suit of the boys' clothes, and I will soon have him afoot."

With a joyous light beaming upon her face, the bright-eyed Zoe hastened to obey the demand. The stimulant was soon brought and administered. The youth was then turned upon his face, and by continual pressure upon the back and sides, the water was ejected from his lungs. Signs of returning consciousness were soon manifest.

When he had done all he could, Hubert Leland arranged him in a comfortable position and went out to await that result which only time could effect.

Hubert Leland was a man of a naturally grave, yet pleasant demeanor. Tall and commanding in form, with a calmness in his tone, a strange intelligence in his steel-gray eyes, it was evident that in him great force of character and precision of mind were strongly predominant.

His companions, who answered to the names of Silas Jamison and Theodore Roberts, betrayed by their looks that they were honest, kind-hearted men.

"How is he, father?" inquired Zoe, when he came out of the tent.

"He is being punished for being inquisitive," the old man replied, solemnly.

"He will live, then?" asked Roberts.

"Yes, but he will doubtless suffer. Were he not a boy, I would feel sore toward him. But his youth will excuse him. He is a fine, manly-looking fellow, brave and fearless to a fault, I dare say. Perhaps we may be able to enlist him in our service, and thereby involve him in our secrets. But our surrounding situation—how is that?"

"The savages have disappeared, and not a sign of life is visible on the bay or along the shore, father," replied Zoe. "But you can hear firing going on out among the hills to the southward of the bay."

"The red-skins have gone ashore and got into a fight with this boy's friends," said Jamison, "and we may be involved in trouble now."

"The red heathens know better than to venture within gunshot of us," declared Leland; "therefore we might resume our work, boys. And Zoe, you will not fail to keep your watch on all sides. If the youth should recover, he will doubtless be very curious about his situation. You know your duty, daughter."

"Certainly, father," responded the maiden.

Having thus cautioned his daughter, Hubert Leland and his male friends advanced to the interior of the island and entered a large quadrangular tent whose covering was of heavy oil-cloth.

Zoe scanned the surrounding shores, and having made certain that no enemy was in sight, she turned and on tiptoe stole into the tent where Frank Caselton lay. This tent was large and strongly constructed. Of the half-dozen that stood around it upon the island, half hidden beneath vines and bushes, it seemed to be the main dwelling, or sitting-room, of the little party. It was furnished and fitted up with that peculiar air of neatness and comfort which only the deft fingers of woman can impart to the arrangements of a household.

In one corner, on a kind of a shelf, were a number of books. A guitar, several pictures and a bouquet of beautiful flowers contributed their sweetness and magical influence to the apartment. In addition to these, a rosewood clock ticked the hours away.

Zoe sat down by the side of the seemingly unconscious youth, and gazed upon his handsome face with a mingled expression of pity and admiration beaming in her soft eyes. She knew no impropriety in going alone into the tent. She was young and unsophisticated in the ways of the world. Her motives, like her heart, were the purest of the pure. She felt an interest in the young stranger which was but the inspiration of a kind and generous soul—the offspring of a heart untrammelled by care or the weight of human sin.

Zoe Leland was a beautiful creature, just budding into womanhood. She was lithe in form, yet molded with all the grace of health and beauty nourished by unalloyed happiness. Her features were of the rarest type of female loveliness, wearing an air of queenly grace and modesty, and at the same time partaking much of her father's force of character and decision of mind.

As before stated, she was dressed in a sky-blue robe, girded at the waist with a delicate white ribbon. Her golden hair was gathered back from her brow and temples, and permitted to flow like a silken mass down her back. She wore but a single jewel—a diamond ring of great value and exceeding brilliancy.

Thus appeared Zoe Leland, the Lady of the Isle, as Idaho Tom addressed her—a rare flower, there blooming alone, and "wasting its sweetness on the desert air," as it were. And why?—who can tell?

For a moment or two Zoe lingered by the bedside of the young hunter; then she rose, and going out, seated herself under the shade of a manzanita, where she could command a view of the whole bay, and the surrounding shores.

No sooner, however, was her face turned away from Frank, than the youth's eyes opened and followed the retreating form with a gaze that seemed eager with admiration.

CHAPTER XX.

A RAPID CONVALESCENCE.

FRANK CASELTON had recovered consciousness before Zoe visited him, but had feigned sleep while she was there—not through any want of honor or true manly spirit, but from that physical impulse which often compels one to do things independent of the mind's volition.

Frank felt vexed at his own conduct, but excused himself on the grounds of an excited mind and unsteady nerve.

As soon, however, as Zoe went out, he rose to a sitting posture and gazed around him like one bewildered. He was not a little surprised at the elegance of his surroundings—an elegance and comfort that betokened education and refinement. The tick of the clock before him sounded so familiar, so homelike, that it revived vivid thoughts in his mind and forced a film of moisture to his eyes.

Still suffering from the effects of his late adventure, he experienced a nauseating sickness at the stomach, and a dull, painful dizziness of the brain. With some effort he staggered to his

feet, and going out of the tent, advanced with almost noiseless footstep toward Zoe.

His shadow falling across the maiden's path caused her to start with a little cry of alarm and surprise.

"Pardon me, fair stranger," he said, apologetically, "for my intrusion—"

"Certainly, sir," she said, recovering herself. "I am greatly surprised, yet pleased, to see that you are recovering so rapidly."

"I thank you for your kindness," Frank responded. "I have some idea of where I now am. I also have a very indistinct recollection of seeing a canoe with yourself in it, round the island, and of being struck by a bullet that tumbled me over into the lake. The rest, up to the moment I regained consciousness in that pleasant little lodge, is all a blank."

"If you will please be seated on that bench, Mr.—"

"Frank, Caselton, without the Mister," the youth put in, as he seated himself on the rustic seat indicated.

Zoe then narrated all that transpired after the Indian's almost fatal shot, her whole spirit seeming to flow out in a melody of words.

Frank listened, enraptured, to the sweet music of her voice; and he found himself at a loss for words to express his heartfelt thanks for her and her friends' kindness in saving his life.

"Then you alone rescued me from drowning—you, a feeble girl?" Frank remarked.

"Is not a feeble girl as capable of doing good as any one?" was Zoe's reply, a smile rippling over her fair face.

"Yes, certainly; but it would seem impossible for you to have dragged as big a fellow as I am, water-soaked at that, out of the lake."

"I did it, nevertheless," was the girl's reply.

"Then to you alone I owe my present existence, fair stranger—"

"Call me Zoe—Zoe Leland," she added.

"Zoe—Leland," repeated Frank, in an abstracted manner, "and you dwell here upon this island, do you, Zoe?"

"I am here, Mr. Caselton," was the evasive response of the maiden.

"Your father then is a hunter?"

"His business, I hope, is a legitimate one," she again responded, in that same manner which precluded further questioning on that subject.

"Well, this is a paradise of a place, Miss Leland. This transparent lake, reflecting all the glories of heaven, and the majestic mountain, is one of nature's sublime beauties. Why it is so clear, I can form no idea, unless it is silver-lined."

Zoe looked quickly up with the slightest tinge of surprise visible on her face.

"It is very beautiful," she finally remarked, glancing out over the lake and along the shores.

A minute of silence followed, then Frank said:

"I do wonder if my friend escaped ashore?"

"I think he did. I heard a sharp firing going on over yonder among the hills soon after I landed with you here, and I presume your friends, of whom I know there are four or five, were engaged with the enemy."

"If I could only get ashore, I would hunt them up, and intrude no longer upon your hospitality," the youth said, thoughtfully.

"I am sure, Frank Caselton, your presence here is not obtrusive. Rest assured of being among friends."

Frank's heart gave a great bound and a feeling, far stronger than admiration, arose in his heart for the beautiful maiden. And Zoe must have noticed it in his clear, brown eyes, for her long silken lashes drooped shyly as she toyed thoughtlessly with a leaf plucked from the bush whose graceful boughs protected her from the sun's hot tide.

Frank had construed her words of kind assurance into a modest invitation to remain upon the island. He flattered himself that she felt pleased with his company.

The two lingered an hour or more under the cool shade of the manzanita, then Zoe arose and tripped lightly as a happy school-girl away to her tent.

Frank arose and sauntered leisurely about the island, noting the peculiar construction of the floating mass.

The island must have been about eighty feet long by half that number in breadth. A narrow channel or cove cut the whole half-across its width. It was about ten feet wide, and had evidently been intended as a kind of a harbor for the protection of canoes, as several light crafts were resting therein.

The foundation of the island was of logs fastened securely to-

gether. These were covered with a layer of the rich, alluvial deposits of soil taken from the adjacent valley; and in this was growing a perfect forest of shrubbery transplanted there by the hand of man. Aquatic plants and vines had been planted around the edge of the island, and now trailed their green festoonery in the crystal waves. Here and there was a framework of poles, or a tent embowered with a fleece of wild ivy or cucumber. Flowers of the brightest hue and sweetest fragrance flourished under the culture of the lovely Zoe's hand. Altogether it was an island that rivaled in beauty the famed flower-covered chinampas which adorned the Mexican lakes in the days of the Aztec empire, or the floating gardens of the lake of Cashmere.

Frank did not allow his curiosity to lead into impertinent inquiry in his stroll about the little spot. He regarded each object with but a passing indifference. There was one large, square tent, however, that he came to regard with some inward curiosity. It was carefully closed all around, but, for the fact that he caught the sound of plashing water within it, and saw the dim outlines of a man through the walls, he would have thought nothing strange about it.

In walking around, Frank passed another tent in which were a number of rifles and other weapons of defense. In still another were a small "emigrant stove" and cooking utensils. There was another tent upon a slight elevation surrounded with brushwood and vines, which guarded the approach to the door. This was evidently a secret apartment seldom used.

The inhabitants of the island appeared to be well provided against the contingency of a siege, and yet betrayed an indifference that was not consistent with their surrounding dangers.

An hour before sunset the three men came out of the large, square tent, their faces wearing a look of care and anxiety. They were surprised to see Frank out, yet listened with apparent joy to the youth's own story of his speedy recovery, and at once entered into a guarded conversation with him.

Their intercourse was finally interrupted by Zoe, who announced supper ready.

Frank was invited to the board of the islanders, and accepted the invitation.

Hubert Leland asked the blessing when they had all gathered around the board. The deep, solemn earnestness in his full, strong voice, appealed directly to Frank's young heart, and plunged him still deeper in mental speculation as to the avocation of these people.

After supper, the evening, until bed-time, was spent in conversation; but the men were so guarded in their remarks that Frank could not gain the slightest clue to the mystery in which their secluded life involved them.

At length he was assigned a couch in an unoccupied tent, adjacent to the large one occupied by the three men during the day. He had lain long enough to wear out any ordinary wakefulness, but the fate of his companions, and the bright eyes of the lovely Zoe, kept his mind busy, and banished sleep.

He was suddenly started by a sharp, metallic clicking in the large tent near. He arose to a sitting posture and listened. The clicking was continued. It was that of a telegraphic battery! Frank knew this, for, as before stated, he was an operator himself by occupation.

The youth strained every nerve in his effort to read the sound. But the sound suddenly ceased; still Frank waited in hopes it would be resumed. And it was. Frank caught every click of the instrument, and this is what he read:

"Friends, look out—the country is full of Molook's devils, red and white. Also a band of Boy Hunters is trying to probe the mystery of the floating island, and are now skulking around the lake. Scout."

CHAPTER XXI

"OFFICERS OF THE LAW."

FRANK was not a little surprised by his discovery, for it threw a deeper shade of mystery around the islanders, and the legitimacy of their occupation, notwithstanding the asseveration of Zoe to the contrary. The telegram he had read off told him that they were guarded and watched over by "Scout," and that they were kept posted on the island as to what was going on ashore, by means of telegraphic communication. And then "Scout's" allusion to the Boy Hunters skulking around, seemed to convey the idea that they—the boys—needed watching.

Frank entertained no fears, however. He could not convince himself that the fair Zoe could be the child of a villainous father, nor that her associations were of a suspicious character. He

was inclined to be more charitable toward the islanders from the fact that he had become enamored of the beautiful maiden. A feeling had sprung up in his breast, which he knew full well was the beginning of a first love.

As he sat alone in his tent, busy with his own thoughts, the stillness of the night was suddenly broken by a stern voice calling out, clear and distinct as a trumpet blast:

"Who comes there?"

It was Hubert Leland's voice—deep and full as the lion's roar.

"Officers of the law," was the response that came from out upon the bay, clear and distinct.

"What seek you here?" demanded Leland.

"A fugitive from justice—a boy criminal—whom I know to be with you," replied the "officer of the law."

Frank was startled by this announcement. He knew that there was some mistake, else the man was lying—trying to deceive the islanders. He arose, and, dressing himself, was in the act of stepping out when he heard something like a sharp knife cut through the rear of the canvas tent. He turned in time to see the outlines of a human head thrust into a long slit in the canvas, and hear a soft voice say, in an excited whisper:

"Frank, flee! They are after you! Take one of our canoes in the harbor, and fly for your life! Go, I implore you!"

It was the voice of Zoe.

"I am no criminal, Zoe; therefore I have no fears. That man, whoever he may be, is a traitor and villain trying to deceive you all. I am ever so much obliged to you, Zoe, for your kind warning, but I shall not leave. Your friends will need my assistance, and—"

Further words were here cut short by the deep, stentorian voice of Leland:

"There is a youth here," he shouted to the "officer," "and if you can prove that he is the one you are after—"

"They cannot, father; they are trying to get aboard our island to murder us." It was Zoe who, creeping slyly to her father's side, spoke thus.

At this juncture Frank appeared from the tent. The moon was in the zenith, and the bay lay all aglare with dazzling splendor. Out upon the water, not over a hundred yards from the island, the youth saw a canoe standing. Two men were seated in it, one of them holding a white object evidently intended as a flag of truce.

"What have you to say, young man?" Leland demanded, turning to Frank.

Frank scanned the canoe and its occupants for fully a minute, then replied:

"There is a movement on foot to murder you all. That man is no officer, but a villain—one of the party, I dare say, that attempted to kill me to-day. His story is an infamous plot to get aboard your island."

"What evidence have you for such a bold assertion?" Leland asked.

"The simple fact that I am no criminal."

"But you cannot prove this to be so."

"No, not now, Mr. Leland; but if you permit that canoe to come ashore here the truth will demonstrate itself; especially as to the treachery concealed behind that flag of truce. You are not a frontiersman, Mr. Leland; that I know from observation; neither am I, but I have learned by a short experience not to trust every stranger I meet. The border is a refuge for lawless characters, and so half the men we meet are possessed of the characteristic treachery and cunning of their associates, the savages. I know that man is a villain, for he has told a base falsehood."

A moment's silence ensued. Frank heard a faint clicking sound in the large tent. The battery there was at work, but it soon ceased.

Then Zoe burst from the tent and running to her father's side cried:

"Father, I have heard from Scout! He says look out for five Indians and two white men—that they embarked from the north side of the lake, and, hugging the shore, turned into the bay. They are enemies."

"Then you are right, my boy. Those two men are villains," said Leland. "The five Indians are concealed about the canoe."

Frank knew the source from whence this information had come, but affected ignorance of the fact.

"Sir Officer of the Law," shouted Leland to the man in the boat, "I have reason to doubt the truthfulness of your story, and must decline to allow you to land."

"In such a case, then, I will be justified in boarding you," replied the man in the boat.

"You will do so at your peril, sir. Two men can hardly contend with four. I presume, however," the old man said, by way of testing their cunning, "that if I send the youth out to you that will suffice."

There was no reply, and the truce-bearer and his companion appeared to be holding a consultation. This silence lasted for several moments, when the man finally shouted back

"I desire to search your island."

"Then, sir, your desire cannot be gratified."

"You will all suffer the consequence of harboring a criminal, now mind," threatened the man.

"There is no criminal here," and the words were flung back with defiant scorn. "You are a base coward to skulk behind a flag of truce—a treacherous poltroon! Begone at once, or, by the gods, I will blow you out of the water!"

The man dropped his flag and picked up a rifle from the bottom of the canoe. The polished barrel glimmered ominously in the moonlight, as the villain threw it into position. A bright jet of flame shot from its muzzle, and a bullet whistled close to the ears of Hubert Leland.

"A poor shot," muttered the old man, and turning, he walked calmly to the upper end of the island, where he threw aside the brushwood that guarded the entrance to the long, low tent standing there. He then stripped the canvas from its frame, and busied himself about something that an intervening bush concealed from Frank's view.

The men in the boat, strange to say, disappeared the moment the shot was fired, while the canoe, swinging around, began moving sideways toward the island.

"Ah, I see into it now!" said Frank: "you can easily distinguish half a dozen gun-barrels glimmering over the top of the canoe."

Scarcely had the last word fallen from the youth's lips, ere a broad sheet of flame was belched forth from the spot where Leland stood, and the thunderous crash of a cannon burst through the night, calling forth a hundred echoes from the recesses of the grim old mountains.

The island almost rocked under the terrific shock of the iron-lunged monster, and the recurring sound-waves compelled Frank to press his hands upon his ears to shut out the deafening roar.

All eyes naturally turned toward the canoe, or to where it had last been seen, for only pieces of it were now visible, floating about upon the water. Hubert Leland had, in a measure, kept his word—had destroyed the canoe, and, for all he knew, had blown the treacherous truce-bearer out of existence. At least, no sign of life, no cry of agony arose from the wreck that the solid shot of the little howitzer had made.

"I am so glad matters turned out the way they have, for all it is bad enough," said a soft voice at Frank's side, and, gazing down, he saw Zoe, with a pale, yet joyous face, standing near him.

"The villains have received a terrible punishment," he replied.

"I knew you were innocent, Frank—that you were not a criminal."

"I accept your words as a very high compliment, Miss Leland—Zoe—inasmuch as I am an entire stranger to you. And I am almost hourly being placed under obligations to you folks here. I hope I will get away before I become a burden, or lead you into trouble."

"Do not give yourself uneasiness about infringing on our hospitality. It is one of papa's virtues to be generous and kind to strangers whose faces bear such evidence of true honesty as yours."

"Indeed, Zoe," Frank began, but the lithe figure of a man stepped from behind a bush, and confronted them, rifle and hat in hand.

It was Idaho Tom, the Outlaw of Silverland!

CHAPTER XXII.

IDAHO TOM FACE TO FACE WITH ZOE.

THE sudden, silent and unexpected appearance of Idaho Tom on the island, struck Hubert Leland and his friends almost dumb with astonishment. That he had effected a landing without discovery seemed almost incredible; and yet there was the handsome, daring youth before them; while a canoe rocked on the tiny waves that chafed the shores of the island.

"Good-evening, friends," the youth said, with a polite bow;

"I beg you will pardon my unceremonious intrusion, and allow me to introduce myself as Thomas Taylor, a romantic young vagabond by occupation."

"Ah, then you are Idaho Tom?" replied Mr. Leland, advancing toward the youth.

"Yes, sir; the same," was the youth's response.

"I am glad, very glad to meet you, Tom; for you have rendered me an inestimable kindness in saving my daughter. Mr. Taylor, my daughter, Zoe Leland."

In her moment of joy and embarrassment, Zoe inadvertently extended her hand to the youth who had saved her from savage power; and in the silent language of a blush, acknowledged the pleasure of his acquaintance.

The touch of her little soft hand thrilled like magic through the form of the impulsive young outlaw; and for a moment his senses swam in a sea of infinite delight. He was confused with joy. It was the happiest moment of his eventful young life, and in his attempt to escape an exhibition of his embarrassment and overflowing joy, he stammered and blushed like an overgrown school-boy. Fortunately Hubert Leland came to his rescue.

"I am surprised, Tom, that you even dared to venture here-aways, to say nothing of your success in effecting a landing."

"Sir, I took advantage of you, I must admit. When you were engaged with those outlaws and Indians, I stole over here from the west shore. I did not come, however, without permission. The Mad Trapper furnished me a canoe and gave me instructions to enable me to reach the island, if challenged by you."

"Then, it's all right, Tom. The Mad Trapper is a kind of a privileged character in these parts. So make yourself at ease, young man. This is Mr. Frank Caselton—a youth who came here through an accident which came near terminating his existence."

"Mr. Caselton, I am pleased to meet you, and congratulate you on your escape," said Tom, extending his hand in a cordial manner; "are you a hunter, Frank?"

"An amateur only," replied Frank.

Zoe withdrew, as did Jamison and Roberts also. Leland and the two boys sat down to talk and watch for some new demonstration of the foe.

"Then the old trapper," said Leland, "thinks that Molock is at the head of all this mischief, does he?"

"He is positive of it," replied Tom.

"Why is Molock permitted to carry on all this deviltry undisturbed by any one?" questioned Frank.

"I might answer your question by asking another: why is yonder mountain permitted to tower above us when, if it was away we could see the sun rise?"

"But Molock is certainly not as immovable as yonder mountain."

"He might be conquered if we knew where his den is. But everybody is so busy in this land of hidden treasure that they can't take time to hunt down an outlaw."

"I judge then," replied Frank, "that you have not been long in this country—neither you nor the trapper—else you would know where Molock's headquarters are located."

"Do you know?" asked Leland.

"I do, most assuredly. I have been there—been a captive in his den, and know whereof I speak."

"Can this be possible?" exclaimed Leland. "When were you in his den—where is it—and how did you get out? Tell us all about it, Frank!"

"Yesterday morning we made our escape. The stronghold is in a north-easterly direction from here, and in an almost inaccessible part of the mountain. To reach it we first enter a narrow valley which terminates in a dismal canon. This canon leads to a cavern or long tunnel opening into a little round valley shut in upon all sides by high shelving or perpendicular cliffs from thirty to a hundred feet in height. This valley is where Molock's quarters are. It can be reached on foot only by way of the cavern, although we escaped by means of a rope lowered from the top of the cliff by a friend. We were trying to escape from a party of savages when we ran into the outlaw's den."

"Well, this is surprising news," said Leland.

"It is good news—glorious news!" exclaimed Idaho Tom. "It will afford an opportunity for a little excitement. I haven't had a fight since the night I was caged with old Zedekiah Dee, the trapper."

"That was no boy's play of a fight," said Leland, fixing his eyes upon the young outlaw.

"Then it was you and your friends who came to our assistance?"

Leland smiled, but made no reply. His silence to Tom was an affirmative answer.

"Frank, do you think a dozen men well armed could capture Molock and his band?" asked Leland.

"It would be doubtful, unless you could surprise them. One man concealed in the cavern that leads to the valley could hold it against a regiment of soldiers. They might, however, be lowered into the valley by means of ropes and take them un-ware."

"Is it true that he keeps a herd of wolves there, or is it only an invention?"

"It is true. He has a pen built of stone, and in it are not less than one hundred wolves, old and young; and they are all that human mind can conceive of half-starved, ravenous, hungry-eyed beasts. The very stones that compose the walls of the pen have been gnawed by the hungry pack, and death itself rises from the pen in poisonous vapors."

"This is worse than I had ever dreamed," replied Leland; "I never credited the report for the reason that there seems to be extant among the Indian tribes of the Pacific a traditional story that a man herded wild beasts in the mountains and sent them forth throughout the country in an invisible guise to destroy the red-men. In other words, that he was the keeper and disseminator of death. And so the name of Molock has become synonymous with that of the grim monster."

"It is synonymous with Satan, anyhow!" said Tom; "but, friend Caselton, what did the old vampire propose to do with you?"

"Give us over to the tender mercy of his pets."

"He would not have done so, though," Leland said, "it would have been diabolical, in a savage even."

"I believe he would, for human bones lay in the pen."

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed Tom, in horror; "of all the stories of crime attributed to saint or sinner, Jew or Gentile, this is the most hellish."

"Inhuman—monstrous!" cried Leland.

"Let us in the name of humanity and the great Jehovah, declare war upon Molock and his minions," said Idaho Tom, waxing eloquent with the spirit of adventure. "Yes," he continued, "let us wage a war of extermination against them. Such a curse should not be permitted to see his shadow in God's mirror, this lake of the clouds."

"I indorse your sentiments fully," added Frank, as the pretty face of Zoe rose up before his mind's vision, and filled his spirit with new strength and courage. In fact, both Frank and Tom had become inspired with the same feeling, by the same object. Both loved Zoe, and in warring against Molock and his band had her personal security in view. Each one, however, mistrusted the other of his regards for the fair girl. Love is keensighted and intuitively becomes warned of the regards and motives of other hearts toward the object of its affiliation. Thus forewarned of a rival, jealousy and envy follow the least advantage in favor of that opponent.

Idaho Tom felt that his claim to the hospitality of the islanders was paramount to all others; yet he saw in the handsome face of pleasant Frank Caselton a formidable rival.

The balance of the night was spent by the three watchers in desultory conversation; but by the first streaks of dawn all were astir.

After breakfasting with the folks on the island, Frank and Tom took their departure in the canoe which had brought the latter over.

The boys had grown quite intimate during their short sojourn together. Their naturally impulsive spirits flowed harmoniously together, notwithstanding each considered the other as his rival.

As they glided out from the little island into the bay, Zoe waved them adieu. Each acknowledged the maiden's parting salutation by a wave of the hand.

They soon reached the shore, and having landed and concealed the canoe, walked into the forest, both maintaining an unusual silence.

They finally came to where the prostrate trunk of a fallen pine disputed their passage.

Without a word Tom sat down upon it. His face had assumed a flushed, excited look, and his eyes burned with some inward fire. He drew his revolver with one hand, while with the other he pointed to a rock before him, and then said:

"Sit down there, Frank. Don't refuse. I want to talk to you."

His voice sounded dry and husky, and his outstretched hand trembled like a leaf in the wind.

In obedience to his request, Frank sat down upon the rock facing him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BILLY BRADY'S ADVENTURES.

We will now go back and look after our other young friends. It will be remembered that Wild Dick, the Boy Hunter, had undertaken to swim ashore after he and Frank had been left alone at the mercy of the waves by the breaking of the paddle; and not knowing but that Frank was close behind, the youth pushed rapidly through the water toward the southern shore.

The Indians seeing the manner of his proposed escape, turned back, and having effected a landing, endeavored to head him off. But Bold Heart, Billy Brady and Perry, who had also witnessed the adventure of their two friends, came promptly to the rescue, and driving the Indians back, covered Dick's retreat ashore.

As soon as he had reached the bank, the fearless young Boy Hunter gave a shout of triumph and turned to see where Frank was. To his bitter disappointment, his companion could not be seen. With eager eyes he searched the smooth surface of the bay, but all in vain; no Frank was visible.

His three companions coming up at this juncture, related what they had witnessed concerning the fate of Frank.

Much of that painful load of fear was lifted from Dick's mind; still he was sorely uneasy, and assumed all the blame for the whole unfortunate affair.

"Then you are not certain Frank was killed?" Dick said, with manifest sadness in his tone and look.

"I think not," Perry replied, "for the reason that I saw him struggling in the water after he fell overboard. I am not certain he was touched at all by the savage's bullet, but he seemed perfectly helpless when the girl went to his assistance."

"Well, dod-rot the luck," growled Dick, in vexation, "if I had a canoe I would go straight to that island and ascertain the extent of his troubles. I am about exhausted or I would swim out there, but the distance is much further than it appears."

"We will have to be patient and trust to fate," answered Perry. "That island may be the rendezvous of a band of outlaws; and then it may be the quarters of friends who will take good care of our comrade if he is only wounded. Here is your rifle and accouterments, Dick. Frank's I will take care of myself."

"Well, what's the next confounded thrap wees 'll shtick our plagued noses into?" demanded Billy, impatiently.

"Getting nervous, ain't you, Billy?" said Dick.

"Och, now, and none av yer abuse, or b' the sowl of me grandmother I'll hunt up a rhed-skin and let him scalp me."

"For Billy's sake, what course do you advise, Dick?" asked Perry.

"All we can do is to hang around this lake until we can find out the fate of our friend Frank."

At this juncture Bold Heart, who had been off watching the Indians, came running up excitedly.

"What is it, Bold Heart?"

"Inguns comin'—lots ob um," he replied, moving on without scarcely slackening his pace, and signifying to his companions to follow him.

"Tracks!" exclaimed Billy, as they all started off after the Indian youth on the double-quick.

They retreated back into the hills and concealed themselves among the rocks; but they soon discovered that their lynx-eyed foes were upon their trail and at once opened a vigorous, and not altogether ineffectual, fire upon them. The red-skins were forced to seek shelter, hiding among the rocks where not even the keen eyes of Bold Heart could ferret them out.

"We'll wait here until night covers our retreat, I am thinkin'," said Dick, soberly.

"I declare we spend a good deal of time waiting for the cover of darkness to help us out of our blunders," put in Perry, in a very matter-of-fact tone.

"Toime is gitting to lean heavy on me," added Billy, winking at Dick and Perry in a significant manner. "A game of cards would be a blessed thing to kill toime, and—"

"Ugh!" ejaculated Bold Heart, taking the hint, "me play Billy boy game—two, three games," and dropping upon the ground he produced his greasy pack of cards and began to deal them.

"Yees are my chicken, ingin; and begorra, it's not a game you'll git, so it ain't," said Billy, seating himself before the red-skin youth.

The game was soon under way. "Seven-up" was Bold Heart's hobby, and Billy was not a bit particular. He could play at any game.

The game soon attained a point where no little excitement entered into the contest. Each stood six points, and it was Billy's deal. The Indian stood upon the king. A low, pleasant laugh burst from Billy's lips when he had looked at his hand.

"Me beat Billy boy—bet chaw tobak," said the Indian, with a grim smile of delight.

"I don't bet nor chaw tobakker," returned Billy, "but I know whar there's a skulp that says you can't beat me fur a skulp."

"Shake," was the Indian's ready response, extending his hand toward his opponent.

The two shook hands over the bet of scalp for scalp, though it is not to be supposed that either was in earnest.

Billy held the ace, and was about to play the card when a savage bullet whizzed through the air and picked the card from the youth's hand, as the report of a rifle rolled down the air, clear and sharp.

"Trump king," said Bold Heart.

Billy picked up the card, but to his surprise found that the Indian's bullet had perforated the center of the card, completely tearing away every vestige of the spot by which it was designated.

For once the young Celt was completely nonplused; but claimed the game on the grounds of having held the highest trump. But Bold Heart would not accept the piece of perforated pasteboard, and a friendly dispute at once arose. To settle the matter arbitrators were called. Perry and Wild Dick were the ones to settle the dispute. They decided that, as Billy's card could not be identified, as the card he claimed it was, it could not be admitted; and so the game was won by Bold Heart.

"All right, and it's Billy Brady that caved handsomely. It's your game, ingin, 'ca'se the b'ys so say, and ye shall have yer scalp so help me, mother av Moses!"

Billy sprung to his feet, picked up his rifle, and without adding another word stole away—creeping behind rocks, leaping from cover to cover like a hare. No one knew where he was going, but all saw that he was set upon some object.

He crept along among the rocks and shrubbery for some three hundred yards, then descended a steep declivity to the edge of a little plateau, or valley sparsely timbered. Half-way across this opening was a low flat rock, resembling the base of a broken granite column; and directly in a line with this rock, on the opposite side of the valley, the keen eyes of the young hunter discovered the plumed head of an Indian projecting a few inches above the top of a sharp rock.

For Billy to bring his rifle into position occupied but an instant; but, quicker than a flash the tufted head of the savage disappeared.

Billy now dropped upon his hands and knees and found that the rock in the opening covered the Indian entirely. Knowing that he was concealed likewise from the Indian's eyes, the youth resolved to creep across the valley and gain a closer position to the foe; so he at once set out, keeping the rock between them, guided by a tall tree on a line with the Indian and rock. Singular as it may appear, the same idea seemed to have entered the savage's brain at the same instant, for he, too, began creeping across the valley, keeping that friendly rock between them, sighting objects beyond as guides.

The result of this movement was that the foes reached the rock at the same moment, unknown to each other, and paused to rest before attempting any further movement.

The rock was nearly circular in form, about three feet high by ten or twelve in diameter, and almost level on top. And this was all that now separated the two enemies.

As if actuated by the same impulse throughout, both Billy and the savage began maneuvering around the rock at the same instant in hopes of getting a glimpse of each other. It happened that Billy went to the right and the Indian to the left, when, to the profound astonishment of each, the face of his enemy whom he supposed to be several rods away, appeared around the rock not over five feet away!

The surprise was like an electric shock, and for a moment the foes glared at each other with amazement, then involuntarily dodged back and put the rock between them.

"Hoot now, and by my sowl here's a purthy shindy!" exclaimed Billy, scratching his bushy head, while he endeavored to keep a watch in opposite directions around the rock at the same time. "The rhed fool," he continued, "and phat's brought the grasy, big lummix here?"

The youth slung his rifle to his back, and drew his revolver, as it would be a readier means of defense under the circumstances. He kept a close watch on both sides for the red-skin; and it was not long until he saw the muzzle of his wily foe's rifle coming slowly around the rock so far in advance of the savage that that worthy was not to be seen when half the length of his rifle was in view.

With a smile of mischief upon his boyish face, Billy began to back out, keeping just in sight of the advancing muzzle.

"The dumbest fool, and I reckon he'll fire as soon as his rifle teches sumthin' soft," mused the retreating youth.

Slyly and cautiously, his black eyes glowing like living coals of fire, the savage crept on and on, never dreaming that the projecting muzzle of his gun warned the youth of his approach.

Billy's greatest fear was that other savages might be near, and, seeing how matters stood, come to their friend's assistance; out, even in such an extremity, he had his course decided upon, and, with that same broad, comical smile upon his face, continued his retreat, while the unsuspecting foe continued to advance.

In this manner the ludicrous exhibition of savage craftiness and patience, and the spirit of youthful daring and mischief, were kept up until the circuit of the stone had been made more than a dozen times. But by this time the maneuvering began to assume a sameness to Billy that stripped the whole proceeding of its fun and adventure, and so he cudgelled his brain for some other plan of operation.

It was clear to the youth's mind that one or the other must die. The savage was a powerful fellow, of nearly twice his weight, and in a hand-to-hand encounter he would stand no chance with the red-skin. His only hope lay in getting a successful shot at the warrior, and with this object in view, he concluded to open a conversation with the red-skin.

"See here, rhad-skin," he called out, "whar the divil are yees, anyhow! I can't find yees to save me gizzard. Shtop, thief, I want to speak to you."

"Waugh! pale-face lie!" was the rejoinder, and Billy saw the muzzle start a little faster in pursuit of him.

"Hurra, me b'y, and it's a foul-mouthed dog yees are!" replied the youth.

At this juncture the latter saw the muzzle of the rifle disappear, but soon discovered it coming around the other way of the rock. Billy reversed his way of retreat accordingly, and hurried on until he had put the rock between them—that is, its full width. Then, with the agility and silence of a cat, he sprung upon the top of the rock, and stepping back, crouched down so that only the single feather in the warrior's head-gear was visible. This emblem of savage pride told the youth exactly where the warrior was, and as he still crept on as if determined to bound the lad to death by dogged perseverance, Billy shifted his position on the rock so as to maintain the same distance between them.

The savage was creeping along upon his knees, his body bent forward, and his cocked rifle clutched in both hands.

Billy enjoyed the whole affair immensely; but his position would be an imminently dangerous one should other savages happen to see him, and he soon comprehended the necessity of putting an end to the matter one way or another.

To rush across the rock and shoot the savage before he could have time to rise, was the surest, and really seemed the only safe course to pursue; but instead of doing this, the young Irish dare-devil leaped across the rock and dropped himself plump astride of the red-skin's back!

CHAPTER XXIV.

BILLY TAKES TALL PINE CAPTIVE.

A YELL burst from the warrior's lips. Had a wild-cat landed upon his back he would not have betrayed more terrible surprise. He tried to shake his adversary off, but Billy, with the strong grip of death itself, locked his legs around the red-skin's waist in such a manner as prevented him from drawing his knife; while, with the power of a constrictor, the arms of the youth were clasped over the red-skin's throat until life was nearly choked out of his body.

The warrior threw himself upon the ground and endeavored to roll his foe from his back; he tried to rub and crush him off against the sharp edges of the rock. Like the Old Man of the Sea he clung there as though he had grown upon the savage's back.

The latter finally straightened himself up, drew a strong breath, and then started off across the valley, determined to carry the lad off to where his friends were; but Billy seeing his object closed tighter on the red-skin's throat and choked him until his face grew black and he fell to his knees.

"Now thin," exclaimed Billy, easing up on his jugular, at the same time pressing the muzzle of a pistol against his temple by simply bending his hand without removing his arm from the warrior's throat, "if you attimpt that ag'in, by my sowl I'll let rip this little pup of war. Turn yer face to yer back and mosey stright off, for yees hev got to go back to the b'ys wid me."

Again the Indian attempted to draw his knife from his girdle, but to his surprise found the weapon was gone. This discovery seemed to make him all the more desperate, and he made another frantic effort to dislodge his young enemy from his back; but every hostile demonstration that he made was promptly checked by Billy, who would tighten his grip upon the throat.

The sight was one so ludicrous that it would have provoked Diogenes himself into a fit of laughter. Nor was the ridiculous performance without spectators. Billy's own friends had shifted their position to a point where they could command a view of the whole scene, and even the sober gravity of Bold Heart was forced into an outburst of laughter. Wild Dick became almost frantic in his emotions, and leaning back against a rock laughed till the perspiration rolled down his face.

Billy's friends, however, were not the only witnesses to the tragic comedy. The Indian's friends had also gained a position where they could command a view of the valley; but none of them dared to advance to their friend's assistance. They knew that several unerring rifles would be brought to bear upon them. To attempt to dislodge Billy by a shot under the circumstances would be to endanger the life of their comrade, when in fact they could not fully determine which was really master of the situation.

"Will yees moind me, now, ye dumbest owl spalpeen?" exclaimed Billy, after having administered a severe choking to the savage.

The latter's only reply was a frantic effort to get his teeth on Billy's arm; but in this he also failed, and another pressure of the jugular rendered him more manageable, and convinced him that every attempt to dislodge the young leech at his back would be attended with a severe punishment. He fully comprehended the disadvantage under which he was placed. The cold muzzle of the revolver, pressed against his temple, acted like a powerful electric battery upon his nerves. He dodged and quivered as though he were going into convulsions, and at length, in obedience to his "rider's" command, turned his face southward. But he refused to budge a step.

"Now don't be shtubborn like a mule, rhed-skin," expostulated Billy; "jist advance now like a rigmint av soljers or b the mother av Moses I'll let her rip," and he emphasized his words by pressing the revolver closer against the warrior's temple.

The latter gave his great body a kind of a convulsive jerk, then, with an effort that seemed to tear his heart-strings, he moved slowly away across the valley in the direction of Billy's friends.

The savages that were concealed over among the rocks and shrubbery saw how matters stood and started from their coverts to aid their unfortunate comrade. But the report of three rifles and the fall of one of their number forced a precipitous retreat back to shelter.

This repulse seemed to have driven the last spark of hope from the red-skin's breast, and, as if anxious to be rid of his humiliating burden, he moved on with a quicker step.

Up the acclivity, amid the rocks and towering pines, toiled the downcast warrior, while his friends looked on with vengeful, burning eyes.

"Shtep moighty keerful now, rhed-skin," admonished Billy, as his captive picked his way up the weary hights; "a single mi'shtep moight kill yees. Musha! but yees are a shtout ole booger, rhed-skin—could carry a dozen of the loikes of little Billiam Brady of away-off owld Ireland."

The Indian was as sullen and morose as a murderer, never deigning to answer a word addressed to him more than to obey the injunctions of his captor. His great form shook and trembled at times as though a volcano of vengeful wrath and power was struggling for an outlet. Once he turned and glanced down over a fearful precipice. Billy felt his form sway like a pine in the wind and his breast swell like a billow tossed by an angry storm.

The youth knew at once that the red-skin had self-destruction

in his mind and prepared to act accordingly. But some unknown motive turned the warrior from his suicidal purpose, and he toiled on up the hill.

They soon came to where Billy's friends awaited their arrival. "Billy Brady," cried Perry, "what in the nation are you about?"

"Rhiding up to glory on the back of Satan," was Billy's prompt, yet irreverent reply.

"Billy, you're an audacious young wild-cat—a reckless young scalawag," added Wild Dick, his face almost burning red with inward emotions.

"Och, now, b'ys, don't throw up me poor relations to me face. But come roight down to the fact av it, this rhed-skin is a contrary, big old booger, but mees rhaked the owld ring-tail from taw. There, Bold Heart," and the youth leaped nimbly from the red-skin's back with the air of a conqueror—"there now is the scalp yees won. Bounce it, b'y, bounce it!"

"No, no," interrupted Perry, with a shudder; "that would be barbarous—inhuman. The captive has suffered enough already."

The Indian, who stood with sullen brow and folded arms, regarded Perry with a look of silent thanks, while the cloud upon his face grew less dark.

"Mees caught the scalp for Mистер Bold Heart," said Billy, indifferently, "and he can do as he pl'ases 'bout hoisting it off the booger's snoodle. Only I want him to consider I owe him no scalp."

"The red-skin's a livin' captive," Wild Dick said, compassionately, "and it'd be right ag'in' the laws of civilized warfare to scalp a prisoner. It'd be too much like the red-skins would serve us, were we in such a predicament, and I boast of some civilized blood."

"But it seems to me," declared Perry, "that we're like the man that drew the elephant at the lottery; we have something on our hands that will be a detriment to us."

"To be sure," said Dick, "and so our only course is to let him go at liberty."

The Indian seemed to understand all that was said, for his dusky face relaxed a little more into its natural expression.

"Yes, we'd better let him go," admitted Perry.

"On parole?" asked Billy.

"Yes," returned Dick; then he continued, addressing the warrior: "Red-skin, you have been unfortunate in to-day's adventure. You are now in our power, but I reckon you are aware of that fact. We have it within our province to kill you; that you also know. But look here, red-skin; we're goin' to do the handsome thing by you, in hopes you'll not fail to do the same. We are going to let you go on parole."

"What that?" inquired the Indian, in tolerable English, his face growing brighter.

"A promise on our part to let you go free, on condition you will promise to set free the first white captive that falls into your hands."

"What if him fall into Ingin's hands?" asked the warrior, pointing toward his late captor, who stood near, with a grin on his face and a twinkle in his eyes.

"You are to let him go because he is willing now to let you go. This you must promise before ever we set you free. Will you promise by the Great Spirit that you will do so?"

"Tall Pine loves life. The young pale-faces are not cowards. Tall Pine promises that he will set at liberty the first white captive he takes."

"If you break faith with us, Tall Pine, we will hunt you down like a deer and take your life," was Wild Dick's threat.

"Tall Pine has spoken. His tongue is not crooked."

"Then go your way, Tall Pine—"

"And sin no more," added Billy, nudging Perry, while he looked down his nose to keep from laughing.

The savage turned, and with all the dignity of his proud spirit, walked away. He did not hurry. He would not have shown fear, nor that he suspected treachery, even if he had entertained such a thought—not even to have saved his life.

"Now, boys," observed Wild Dick, as the tall form of the Indian disappeared from sight, "Tall Pine and his followers will make it lively for us. He may keep his promise and liberate the first captive taken; but it won't do to trust him. It'll be war to the knife from this on."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE RIVALS' COMPACT.

FRANK CASELTON and Idaho Tom gazed at each other for a moment after they had sat down in the dense shadows of the pines.

Frank noticed the light in Tom's eyes, but betrayed no outward fear.

Tom seemed more confused than excited, and manifested surprise at having drawn his revolver, and at once returned it to his belt. A faint smile flitted across his face, and he moved uneasily upon his seat.

"Frank," he at length said, hesitatingly, and in a tone that denoted a reluctance to say what was uppermost in his thoughts, "you and I have been friends but a short time—a few hours, in fact."

"Our acquaintance has been limited," affirmed Frank, in a calm, cool tone.

"But in this time I have come to regard you as a gentleman—a boy that can be trusted," continued Tom.

"To praise oneself is half scandal; but, Tom, I have always endeavored to be faithful to my friends, and think I have succeeded. But pardon my interruption."

"Certainly; but, Frank, will you be willing to answer a fair question?"

"Yes; if in my power so to do," answered Frank, not a little puzzled by Tom's question, and the object he was driving at.

"Last night, when I landed on the floating island and made my presence known, I came across you and Zoe Leland in conversation."

"You did," affirmed Frank, an inkling of the truth beginning to dawn upon his mind.

"I even heard a few words that passed between you, for all I was not eavesdropping," continued the young outlaw. "From the manner of your speech, Frank, I naturally came to the conclusion that you loved that girl. Am I right?"

Frank blushed crimson. His eyes sought first the ground, then Tom's piercing orbs, as a smile passed over his face.

"That is really a leading question, Tom," he finally replied; "but, to be honest with you, I do love that girl with all my heart."

"And so do I." Tom spoke with a depth of earnestness foreign to his usual zealoussness.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Frank, gazing inquiringly into Tom's eyes.

"Yes, indeed! A wooden man couldn't help loving that girl—that lovely Zoe Leland. But there is one thing certain: both of us cannot possess her love."

"I know not whether she cares the snap of my finger for either," said Frank.

"Nor I."

"And she never may."

"But you will try to win her love, will you not, Frank?"

"I will."

"And so will I."

"I hope then our objects, both of which can not be gratified, will not make us enemies."

"Never, on my part."

"Nor on mine, Tom."

"My object in introducing this delicate subject was, that by an understanding we might avert antagonism, and enter into a compact that would guarantee continued friendship. I am a boy of about your own age, Frank, and yet I am called the Outlaw of Silverland. I have been reckless and wild, it is true. I have done some things that were not right, yet were in no sense criminal. I am my own worst enemy. I have made money honestly and squandered it. The spirit of mischief and adventure has been in me, ever since I could crawl. Dark and evil deeds have been accredited to Idaho Tom, but there must be another person of the same name. Since I became acquainted, or rather since I first saw Zoe, I have felt like another person. Perhaps that's why I think there's another Idaho Tom—my old self with a new spirit. There is a struggle for the better going on within me. I am conscious of the fact that I have got to mend my ways in order to attain the object to which my soul aspires. In this particular, you doubtless have the advantage of me—not standing in need of reform in moral principle. Now, Frank, I am not going to ask you to relinquish your intention regarding that fair girl. Such a request would be very impudent as well as selfish. But I want to say this: let us make a fair, honest fight for her love; the one defeated in the contest withdrawing with the honor of a gentleman fairly beaten. I don't know that either one can win her love, but both, manlike,

will try, nerved up by more or less conceit. I will make an open fight of it with you, Frank, by going right on as though you were not contending for the same prize. I will know no rival. I will resort to no intrigue nor deception. I will not dog your footsteps to shoot you in the back, like a sneaking coward. I will never mention your name to her unless it is to speak of you as I would of any other friend. I will not, when I meet you hereafter, ask for a comparison of notes in regard to this compact, nor inquire after your success; for one that would speak lightly of Zoe Leland is unworthy of her notice. Perhaps if she could hear me now, she would despise me for making her the object of a contest of this kind. Neither one of us may succeed; but, if we do not, one cannot blame the other. Moreover, I know we would be bitter enemies—deadly rivals, inside of a week, if some such an understanding was not had between us. It is only for you to say now, Frank, whether you will accept my proposition in this matter."

"With all my heart, Tom, I accept of it," replied Frank, surprised by the honesty and magnanimity of the young outlaw, "here's my hand; I pledge you my word and honor that I will pursue an honorable and straightforward course in this matter. I will know no rival in a jealous sense of the word, nor will I persecute Zoe with constant avowals of love. I will pursue such a course as I believe none but a true and honest girl would countenance in any suitor. If I see I am not favored, I will withdraw from the contest, and here, by high heaven, promise to lend my arm to protect her, even as your affianced bride."

"To this I say, amen," responded Tom, and they ended the solemn compact by a clasp of the hands.

Both felt much better over this sensible understanding. Their faces assumed their natural expressions, and their eyes their wonted fire of youth, health and composure.

"And now what?"

"We both promised Hubert Leland that we would aid in ridding the country of Molock and his minions," replied Tom, thoughtfully. "But, Frank, I think it would be best, under the circumstances, for you to go your way and I go mine. Then one will not know what the other is doing; and we will not make fools of ourselves by trying to excel in deeds of devotion, daring and gallantry. Of course, I shall put my best foot foremost, and I presume you will do the same. But all is to be done honorably, and so to guard against differences that might arise, were we to remain together, I think we had better separate. What do you think?"

"I accept your views, Tom, as correct. I will seek my companions at once, and if those islanders institute an offensive movement against Molock, we will join them. So, as time is precious, Tom, I'll bid you good-day."

"Good-by, Frank."

And the two parted.

The morning was still young. A cool breeze drifted across the bay and stirred the tall pines into a soft murmur. In and out of clumps of manzanitas twittered bright-eyed birds with golden plumage. Tiny waves rippled along the shore. The mountain-tops, helmeted with snow, flashed in a blaze of morning glory; and as the sun mounted higher and higher, he shot quivering bars of light down into the somber valleys and deep, dark canons.

Nature seemed to be in a pleasant mood, and everything in harmony with Frank Caselton's spirits. The youth felt certain of the prize—the love of the beautiful Zoe Leland. The thought was uppermost in his mind all the time; but when it suddenly occurred to him that all his bright hopes might be blasted, a vague uneasiness took possession of his mind. He grew nervous and fanciful—the result of a sensitive organization entirely over-wrought. The deep, dense woods seemed to grow darker as the gloomy forebodings of his mind increased. He tried to shake off the unpleasant feeling, but in vain; it grew upon him, and finally he turned and glanced behind him. He thought he heard a footstep, but as he could see no one or nothing, he thought it must only have been fancy.

He moved on—he moved faster. Again he heard, or imagined he heard, a soft footstep behind. His heart rose in his breast, and a wild thought flashed into his mind.

The thought was that Idaho Tom was following him. And if so, why? Was it to break the compact so recently entered into, and put him out of the way?

As Frank asked himself these questions he again turned and looked back; but saw nothing—no one.

He resumed his way, chiding himself for his nervousness.

A bullet suddenly "zipped" apast his ears, and the almost stunning report of a rifle pealed out behind him.

"Right, after all, by heavens!" burst from Frank's lips as he quickened his footsteps into a run, for he was defenseless. "Idaho Tom is dogging my footsteps to murder me!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DEATH CANOE.

NIGHT hung like a shadow over the land. Hill, valley, mountain and forest had all been blended in one dissolving view. The moon sailed asky, attended by her starry retainers. Her full, soft face was reflected in the still waters of Tahoe. The belt of yellow sand that girded the shores of Silver Bay looked like a golden border, and contrasted beautifully with the silvery bay and the dark-green forest of muttering pines.

On the south side of the bay, in among the rocks that were overshadowed by mighty trees, a dull light was reflected from the lower foliage of the trees. Evidently a camp-fire burned beneath the spreading branches of those forest monarchs and published abroad its location.

A pair of restless, searching eyes detected it, and with the silence of a shadow moved away in that direction.

The light, true enough, was the reflection of a camp-fire within whose radius sat and reclined our friends, the Boy Hunters. It was the first night following Billy Brady's adventure with the Indian, Tall Pine.

Wild Dick, Billy and Perry were under a shelving rock where no enemy's bullet could reach them, unless the enemy first made himself master of the position already occupied by their faithful guard, Bold Heart.

Billy's tongue was rattling away as usual, though the absence of Frank Caselton seemed to banish all hilarity from the breasts of his auditors.

Frank, his fate, and the inhabitants of the floating island, were the sole topics of conversation.

Guarded by the vigilant Indian youth, the trio under the ledge felt perfectly at ease, and so the minutes slipped rapidly by, almost unnoticed.

Suddenly a far-off groan came to their ears through the lonesome night.

Bold Heart came bounding down from his look-out into camp in no little excitement.

"What's up, Bold Heart?" asked Dick.

"Somebody in trouble on the bay—mebby Frank," replied the Indian.

In an instant every boy was upon foot, rifle in hand, ready to march.

Bold Heart led the way, and, pressing along through the dense pine woods, they all descended to the shores of the bay.

Pausing just within the shadows at the edge of the sandy beach, they listened—they heard a sound like that which one in distress would make. It emanated from further around the bay, toward the north.

Keeping within the shadows, the boys skirted along the western shore of the bay, and soon came in sight of a skiff, with a single occupant, standing motionless upon the shimmering waters.

The occupant of the little craft was a savage. This the boys could easily see in the bright glow of the moon. He had hold of both oars, and seemed struggling in all the agonies of death, either to use the oars or release them, it being impossible to tell which.

"There! there, boys!" exclaimed Wild Dick, "there's the canoe of which I was tellin' you fellers. I tell you there's somethin' awful about it! It's death almost to touch it. Some invisible power is there. I seen a savage drop dead in it one day. It's always around this bay—always."

"It's a mystery to me," confessed Perry. "See how the savage writhes! He must be suffering the agonies of death itself."

"Death Canoe!" whispered Bold Heart, in superstitious terror.

"The fools that attempt to steal that gay, deceptive little craft are seized with spasms the moment they touch the oars," averred Dick. "This I have observed on more than one occasion. It's a devilish contrivance of them islanders—an infernal machine to— But look!"

A second savage glided from the shadows, ran across the open beach, and plunging into the bay, swam to his friend's assistance. Arriving at the side of the canoe, he reached up, and seizing his friend by the arm, dragged him from the boat after a mighty effort had almost failed.

After dragging him ashore, it was several moments before the warrior could stand, so terrible had been his tortures in the mysterious canoe. As soon as he was able to walk, his friend led him away into the woods, unmolested by the astonished Boy Hunters.

The crack of a rifle rung suddenly across the bay. It seemed to emanate from the opposite side of the floating island which lay dark and silent upon the bosom of the water.

"Well, Satan is to pay to-night, surely," declared Dick, in an undertone.

"And his Satanic majesty has sent a pack of rhad-skins out to collect the money," was Billy's decision.

"Jews and Gentiles!" burst suddenly from Dick's lips, as he saw a broad sheet of flame leap like lightning from the mysterious island. It was followed by a sharp, thunderous boom, which seemed the signal for a thousand deafening echoes to lend their vibrant powers in an attempt to shake the old mountain to its foundation.

For fully five minutes the echoes roared and surged amid the hills, crashed through the forest, and soared upward to the sky like the thunder of chariot-wheels, only to be hurled back to earth again by the mighty voice of Jove.

"Judas!" exclaimed Billy, "and if that wasn't a cannon, I niver heard one in me life."

"It was a cannon, without a doubt—a small howitzer," protested Perry, seriously; "and now it is doubtful, even if we had a canoe, whether we would dare approach that floating island or not, to inquire after Frank."

"Perhaps we can signal some of the folks on the island ashore to-morrow, and ascertain Frank's situation; so we might jist as well mosey back to camp, for all the good standing here will do."

And so they turned and started back to camp, filled with no little wonder and curiosity by what they had seen and heard.

As they approached camp, Bold Heart suddenly came to a halt, and signified for his companions to do likewise. He had seen the light of the camp-fire flare suddenly up, stronger and brighter, and naturally came to the conclusion that some unknown party had taken possession of, and was replenishing, the fire of their bivouac.

Bold Heart crept forward to reconnoiter. He soon returned, and commanding the boys to follow him, advanced cautiously toward the camp. They soon gained a point where they could command a view of the fire, and to their surprise discovered the figure of a white man, dressed in the garb of a borderman, reclining within its ruddy glow.

Wild Dick scanned the figure as closely as circumstances would permit. There was something about the man's rough, bearded face, and in fact his very attitude of repose, that instinctively told the Boy Hunter the stranger was not to be feared; and so he straightway led the advance into camp.

The old borderman rose to his feet as they approached, peered quickly around him into the darkness, and uttered a low, prolonged whistle significant of surprise, when his eyes fell upon the forms of our young friends advancing from out the shadows.

"Why, boys!" burst from the man's lips, in affected astonishment, "where in the plagued old scratch did you come from?"

"See here now, govenir," replied Billy, pushing his cap back from his brow, and shaking his finger at the stranger in a menacing manner, "thit's purty thin for a mon of yer shtanding."

"Why, bub, I stand only six feet in my moccasins," replied the old hunter; "but wharfore do you consider that purty thin?"

"Yer jumpin' our claim. This, begob 's our camp-fire," retorted Billy.

"Wal now, boy, who said it wasn't? I've no 'jections to your claim. I'm ble Zedekiah Dee, the Mad Trapper, and I'm at home any place, or else I'm not at home, jist as suits the case. Step right in, boys, and settle yerselves down to bisness."

Delighted at the honest, hearty manner of the renowned trapper's speech, all the boys advanced and shook hands with him except Bold Heart, who, seeing the camp was not guarded, at once resumed his watch on the eminence overlooking the camp.

The Mad Trapper resumed his position of ease by the fire, and the Boy Hunters sat down around him.

"What caused you young gents to obsquatulate from your camp?" the trapper asked.

"We went to inquire into a noise we heard along the bay," replied Perry Bassett.

"And did you git your boyish curiosity satisfied?"

"Yes, as to the noise we heard; but we finally got worked up all the more, and left the bay completely puzzled."

"You don't proclaim? Thought all was quiet as a Quaker meetin'," returned Zedekiah Dee, with a bland smile and affected surprise.

"Howly Moses, and it's a dumbbed old dafe adder yees must be if yees didn't hear loudly that cannon's boom shtart a million claps of thunder."

"Well, yes, come to think," said Dee, scratching his head, reflectively, "I did hear that little noise, but s'posed it war jist an avalanche a hundred miles or so up the mountain. But be you fellers hunters?"

"We are," replied Dick, "but met with a serious loss to-day—a loss that seldom befalls hunters."

"Do tell!" exclaimed the trapper, aghast.

"Yes; we lost one of our companions, but—"

"Holy Je-rusalem! too bad! too bad!" sighed the trapper.

"Whar did it happen?—when?—how?—all about it!"

Perry narrated the story of Dick and Frank's adventure on the lake, and the accident that subsequently befell the latter, concluding with the remarks:

"I am afraid he will get into bad hands on that island. There are some queer, mysterious things going on around this bay. The place is full of traps and infernal machines. But, whether the girl that rescued Frank and took him to the island, will have the power and will to continue her act of mercy, is more than I can say."

"She—that's the gal—is a cherribim, boys—a cherribim if ever one descended from on high," said the old trapper, starting to a sitting posture. "I've see'd her, time and ag'in. She's the essence of all that's sweet, lovely, pure, gentle, kind, noble and angelic in female woman. Yes, boys, she is a cherribim on earth. Thar's not a spark of manhood in one of you, if you wouldn't lay right down and die fer that girl. Je-rusalem! if I wa'n't so old and infernal ugly, and knowed what to say, and how to say it, I'd make love to her quicker'n you could say hoes-fly. I'm solid on that, boys."

"I am glad to hear that she is such a person," declared Perry; "for if Frank is still on the island alive, she will not let him suffer, for he is a noble-hearted youth himself."

"Boys, it's doubtful if you ever see your friend again," said the trapper, in a solemn tone, glancing at each face to see the effect of his words.

"Is our friend dead?—do you know anything about him?" demanded Perry, excitedly.

"No; but I guess he's not hurt bad; but then he'll fall in love with that little cherribim on the island, and will jist up and die for her," replied the trapper, giving utterance to a good-natured chuckle, to see the change that came over the boys' faces.

"You are inclined to get romantic over that girl," Dick suggested.

"Crazy, arn't yees, govenir?" added Billy.

"Crazy!—yes, more'n crazy—testotally discomboborated, and all for the want of a bit of sport. I'm an ole fool about fun and Ingin-fightin'."

"I reckon yees care more 'bout the fun than the fighting, eh?" returned Billy.

"Wal, now, Irishman, you're beginnin' to doubt my fightin' abilities; but if you want any Ingin-bu'stin' done, bring on yer timber, and I'll show you I'm a small earthquake—a reg'lar torpedo of destruction."

"All right, Misther Torpedo; jist as soon as we foind out about our friend, wees are going up to capter ould Molock, and, by my sowl, I'd loike to see yees explode in his den."

"You'll have to find old Molock's den afore you capture him."

"Begorra, and we know whar it is."

"Now, boy, you're foolishhen with me."

"Pon honor—hope to die if it arn't so."

"He speaks the truth, friend trapper," said Dick.

"Je-rusalem! Then that's goin' to make times brisk as the tail of a wounded deer. That fiend incarnate has lived long enough to entitle him to a front seat in purgatory, and I say pass him down. He has the control of all the Ingins that comes hereaways to hunt and fish; and so he has no trouble in gittin' help to do any meanness that he takes a notion to; and— Ah! what war that?" and the trapper started to his feet.

"Bold Heart's signal of danger!" cried Wild Dick. "Boys, we've got to get out of this, and that in a hurry. Bold Heart never gives a false alarm."

In a moment all were upon their feet. They were at once joined by the Indian, whose actions betrayed excitement.

"Many Ingins 'bout," he said.

"Boys, the cabin of the Mad Trapper is open to friends. If you'll come along with me, two hours' walk will land us there. What say you to that, youngster?"

"Lead the way, ould torpedo, and we'll foller ye," was Billy's reply.

The trapper arruck out into the darkness, followed by the Boy Hunters. The youths were almost compelled to run to keep up with their guide, whose long legs sawed the air with wonderful rapidity.

A little over an hour's walk brought them to the old border-man's cabin that stood wrapt in gloom and silence.

The trapper pulled the latch-string, the door swung open and all passed into the room.

"Dark as a wolf's mouth in here, boys," said the trapper, aloud, but at the same instant a shudder passed over his form.

A pungent odor, like that of burning leather, filled the room; and this led the trapper into a startling discovery—the discovery that a fire was burning in the deep fireplace, while every ray of light was excluded from the room by buffalo-robes hung up before the mouth of the fireplace.

The quick, perceptive mind of the trapper at once grasped the meaning of the whole, and, in a whisper, said to Billy who was nearest to him:

"Lad, thar's a fight—a bloody, gory fight on hand! God only knows how many Ingins are in this room. Thar's a fire burning in the chimley, but the devils have hung up a curtain which they'll soon jerk aside, and flood the room with light, and then—oh! what a bloody fight! Tell yer companions, and tell 'em to git their shooters ready, and when yer all primed give the word, and I'll let on the light, if the varlets don't do it before," and, having thus warned one of his friends, he continued, aloud, while the youth was conveying the startling facts to his three companions: "But jist make yerselves easy, boys, and wait a minit, and I'll knock up a light in the twinkle of a sheep's tail."

He began, fumbling around the shelves in the corner to the right of the fireplace, as if searching for a candle or something to strike a fire.

Suddenly Billy exclaimed:

"Rheady, govenir!"

The trapper reached forward and seizing the curtain that the unknown intruders had so cunningly arranged over the fireplace tore it aside.

A flood of light burst through the room, and, at the same instant almost, the stunning crash of firearms rung out within the cabin and blended with terrible groans and the sodden fall of heavy bodies upon the floor!

CHAPTER XXVII

THE RESULT OF THE CONFLICT.

FOR a moment a scene of the wildest horror prevailed within the cabin of the Mad Trapper. The light which lit up the room so suddenly revealed the presence of five savages standing at the back of the cabin with drawn tomahawks. But, the way the trap had been sprung, the Indians were really the surprised party. Before they could raise a weapon, the revolvers of the Boy Hunters rung out, and three of the five red-skins fell dead.

The other two saw how hopeless their chances would be in a conflict, and with a yell of dismay sprung through the open doorway and escaped into the night. The old trapper uttered a yell of vengeance and sprung out in pursuit of them, but the warriors had the advantage of the shadows of night and escaped.

"They've 'scaped, boys," the Mad Trapper said, in a tone of regret, as he came back into the cabin. "But, boys, you are all dead certainties. That war as skyentifically done up as I ever see'd anything done. Reg'lar torpedo, every one of you. But you see now, don't you, that the red varmints s'posed I'd come back here alone, never thinking of sich deviltry, and lumber right up to the fireplace, and finding the robe there throw it aside and thereby light the room, when they'd be ready and come down on me like a duck on a June-bug. But, they'll not try to extarminate me soon again. They undertook to raise me t'other night, but they were compelled to poll out for tall timmer. Thar war a boy with me that night, and, oh! holy Je-rusalem! he war a double-strung catamount on the fight."

"Who war he?" asked Perry Bassett.

"You've hearn of him, I know you have. His name is Idaho Tom, the—"

"The Outlaw!" exclaimed Dick.

"Yes, the Outlaw of Silverland, as he's called," replied Zedekiah Dee; "but you needn't open them big eyes of yours with holy horror, for Idaho Tom's as human as any other chap livin'."

"But he's an outlaw—a robber."

"And a boy," added Dee, "not a whit over eighteen, and he's one of the bravest, dashinist, handsomest, wiryist young vagabonds that ever pulled a trigger. I tell ye he's a young panther—a tiger, a double-charged, thunderbolt. He's no more robber than I be; it's only a nickname they've given him on about the same principle that they call me the Mad Trapper, or you Wild Dick. I'm not mad; you're not wild; neither is Tom Taylor an outlaw."

"I have always heard that Idaho Tom was a robber, road-agent and cutthroat."

"My boy isn't. He's jist sich a feller as 'll win your confidence and respect the first time you meet."

"Where is he now?" asked one of the boys.

"Somewhar 'bout the bay."

"Then we may meet him soon."

"You may, yes, to be sure; but, boys, I must clear the cabin of them carcasses. They make me fairly boil over—explode."

The dead were at once removed from the cabin; then the door was closed and locked, and the little party sat down to discuss the events of the day and night.

The boys found the old trapper, himself, a boy in spirit, full of rollicking humor and jollity. In his companionship the hours slipped by unnoticed, and the first thing they were aware of the rosy dawn of morning was upon them.

Zedekiah prepared breakfast for the whole party, and after it had been dispatched, the boys took leave of the trapper and set out for the bay to look out for some clue to Frank Caselton's fate.

They found that mysterious death canoe in the place it occupied the previous night. But the floating island seemed deserted by all save a few birds that twittered among the shrubbery.

The boys moved on around the bay. The sun rose higher and higher. The chill breath of night grew warm in the mellow sunshine. Softly the breeze crept in among the great pines. The birds sung gaily above, and the waves rippled gently along the sandy beach.

The sudden crack of a rifle broke the sweet harmony of all. The young hunters came to a halt and glanced cautiously around. A little cloud of smoke hanging on the air above a clump of bushes, told that the one who fired the shot was concealed there, assassin-like.

A moment later a savage crept from the thicket and stole like a panther through the woods; and, still another moment later, another person became visible, following directly upon the trail of the savage. This was a white person—a boy. It was Idaho Tom, the Outlaw of Silverland.

The Boy Hunters followed along in sight of the Indian and the white youth, to watch their maneuvers. It was evident that the Indian was trailing a third person whom they could not see at all.

They had gone but a short way when Idaho Tom raised his rifle and fired upon the savage, just as the latter was raising his rifle to fire. With a cry of agony the Indian fell to the earth.

Then, with a shout of triumph, Idaho Tom bounded forward and was joined by another white youth who emerged from a clump of manzanitas. This person the Boy Hunters recognized as their beloved young friend, Frank Caselton.

Idaho Tom had saved Frank's life, instead of dogging his footsteps to take it.

The next moment Frank was joined by his friends amid the wildest excitement and loudest shouts of joy.

Idaho Tom was introduced to the Boy Hunters, and, after explanations and desultory conversation, the young outlaw withdrew, once more to pursue his own course.

Then Frank and his friends sat down to talk over events that had transpired since their separation, and rejoice together over their reunion.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IDAHO TOM VISITS THE ISLAND.

Two days of anxiety and uneasiness passed to both those upon the land and those upon the bay. None of the latter save Zoe, however, were seen upon the island in all this time; and Frank

Casleton, who, with his friends, still lingered around Tahoe, was satisfied that Hubert Leland and his men were at their mysterious work, whatever that might be.

Frank would have been tempted to visit the island had he possessed a canoe. It seemed like an age since he had seen Zoe, or more like a vague dream in which he had known her, than in reality.

He had not seen Idaho Tom since the morning he had saved his life—the morning of the compact. The hills were swarming with foes, and so they were compelled to keep under cover most of the time. Whenever they did venture forth, it was with extreme caution. Meanwhile, Idaho Tom had not lost sight of the bay, nor the object of his affection; and while he labored under the same disadvantage as his rival, in the want of a canoe to visit the island, he had recourse to the same means used a few days previous in communicating with Zoe.

Having procured a broad-brimmed panama hat at the cabin of the Mad Trapper, he proceeded to convert it into a little transport for the conveyance of messages to the island. Around and over the crown he entwined green parasites and leaves until the whole top of the hat was concealed from view. To this he attached a little sail—the same that Zoe had sent attached to his love-barge a few days previous.

Carrying his delicate craft to a point on the bay where the wind would carry it straight toward the island, he placed it upon the water, freighted with a message of love, and turned it loose at the mercy of the waves.

Gayly the little transport sped away upon its mission, while with a joyous heart, Tom hastened around the bay to the leeward of the island, there to await a reply from the maiden.

Under the green-draped boughs of a low, scrubby pine he sat down to wait and watch. He waited for long hours. Under any other circumstance his patience would have been exhausted; but if the looked-for, longed-for message only came at all, he would feel amply repaid for all time spent in waiting.

To his joy he finally saw the little sail scud out from the island, and bear gayly down toward him. With eager eyes he watched its approach—with burning impatience he waited its arrival.

At length it touched upon the beach at his feet. In among its green drapery he saw that some bright flowers had been entwined by a hasty hand. This alone would have been strong evidence to Tom, of Zoe's love; but it was not all. He found a little slip of paper nestled in among the flowers. He took it out and with wildly throbbing heart, read these words:

"Remembered friend:—All is well at the island. Accept my thanks for your kind regards. I shall never cease to pray for you and your friend, Mr. Casleton."

"Remembered friend," mused the love-sick youth; "I wonder if she remembers me with no other thoughts than those of mere friendship! She surely does, but then the promptness of her reply, the presence of those flowers—both are significant of something that gives me encouragement."

He placed the note carefully away in an inner pocket of his shirt; then he lifted his novel little transport from the water and concealed it, never dreaming that a pair of restless eyes were watching him—noting every movement he made.

With a joyous heart he turned and moved back around the bay, and would have continued on up the valley toward the cabin of the Mad Trapper, had his keen eye not caught sight of a canoe beached on the northern shore. The temptation that this held out to him was too strong to be overcome, and he resolved to visit the island at once. So, launching the craft, he sprung into it, seated himself, and taking up the paddle pushed out into the bay and approached the island slowly and carefully.

With a light of joy beaming upon her lovely face, Zoe met him at the edge of the isle.

Having exchanged words significant of pleasure on meeting, Tom said:

"I beg you will pardon my intrusion, Zoe. I found this canoe upon the beach and without a moment's hesitation or a second thought as to how it came there, I sprung into it and started for this island."

"You are very welcome, Mr. Taylor," the maiden responded, "though I recognize the canoe as the one in which father went ashore nearly an hour ago."

"Indeed! Then I must hurry back. He will be disappointed if the canoe is not there when he returns to where he left it. But, Zoe, I could not resist the temptation to visit this island when the means were afforded." "I am sure I know of nothing here so very attractive," responded Zoe, half defining the youth's most treasured thoughts,

"unless it is the secret with which this island must seem endowed to strangers." But, Tom, is Mr. Casleton in the vicinity yet?"

"He may be in the neighborhood of the lake, though I have not seen him since the morning we left here together."

"I am sure he is not as appreciative of kindness as I have endeavored to be to you, Tom," she said with a pleasant smile. "I saved his life, and he has taken it as a matter of fact, and never showed himself since he left. You saved my life and I have endeavored to show a just appreciation of the noble deed. But, indeed, Tom, that little letter transport of yours is a decided originality; and oh! it is such a relief from the monotonous vigils of the long days, to see it come sailing across the water. Father knows nothing of our correspondence yet, and whether he would disapprove of it as being improper, I am sure I cannot say. I would do nothing against my father's will, and if at any time I fail to answer, you will know that his objections are the cause. He certainly knows, however, that boys and girls couldn't live without play," and the smile that had been hovering upon her lips, broke into a soft ripple of musical laughter.

"Then you regard the exchange of those notes as child's play, do you, Zoe?" Tom asked, his young heart trembling in suspense.

"It's a decided novelty," replied the artless maiden, whose pure, womanly instinct shrunk from the thought of offending the youth by word or deed. "I enjoy it very much, call it what you may; and I do hope that I may continue to hear from you. I feel much safer and happier, when I know there are those around us who are not our natural enemies; as I consider the Indians and outlaws."

"Zoe," said Tom, with a tremor in his voice, "I could be content to watch you and your friends from danger forever; just if I could only be assured of one thing."

"That must be very precious," she replied, gazing away across the water as though she suspected not the object of the youth's avowed self-devotion.

"It is precious, Zoe," he replied, in a tone soft and low as the summer wind; "it would be worth more to me than all the gold on the Pacific shores. And that prize is your love."

The maiden could not conceal her embarrassment. Her face flushed crimson, and her eyes sought the ground. She could not receive this confession of love with indifference, for all she knew what was coming.

Tom noticed her confusion, and accepted it as favorable to him. His heart took courage, but, while waiting for an answer, his eyes fell upon her little brown hands that were toying confusedly with a cluster of leaves, and he started as though an adder had stung him.

Upon one of her fingers flashed a diamond ring which he recognized at a glance. It was the same ring that he had lost at poker in the "Ophir Exchange" at Virginia City—the same ring that had been won by the two strangers that he afterward saw dead in the cabin of the Mad Trapper.

The young outlaw grew almost sick at heart, for it seemed as though Zoe held the jewel so it would flash the terrible truth into his mind—the truth of his being a gambler, a vagabond and outlaw, in the western acceptance of these terms.

The silence that followed both his and Zoe's silent confusion was broken by the latter.

"Tom," she said, "I hope you will not incur father's displeasure by causing him to remain in waiting for his canoe upon the shore. I would be pleased to see you again, for I cannot answer you now regarding the matter of which you speak. Moreover, I want you to have more time to think over what you have confessed, and perhaps you will then think altogether different. Rest assured that my feelings toward you are all they could possibly be, and I dare say will remain the same."

She spoke with the calm thoughtfulness of a woman of mature age. At the same time it seemed to Tom that she was keeping that tell-tale ring glaring into his eyes to remind him of the past.

"I shall live in hopes until I have a direct answer from you," he replied. "So, good-evening, Zoe."

He stepped into the canoe, and seating himself, pulled rapidly for the shore. A few vigorous strokes of the paddle brought him to the beach. Leaving the canoe where he had found it, he turned away into the woods with both pleasant and bitter thoughts surging through his mind.

"One's sins are always visited upon his head," he mused; "no difference whether he has reformed and is doing better or not. Now, that confounded ring is the very same one that I lost—lost

at poker that night at the Ophir; and the men that won it gave it to her. They were doubtless intimate friends of hers, and Jack Hill said they were detectives. But, after all, I believe the little fairy loves me. I have only to live right hereafter—show that I can be something else than a vagabond—in order to gain her confidence. But I'd like to know why she's so confounded particular when her father and friends are—are—well, I won't say what. At any rate, I'll be a man hereafter, whether I win or lose. I know I've got the start on Frank, for he hasn't been over to see her since we left. And blamed if she wasn't inclined to fret about it, too; but then, I reckon she don't care anything for him particularly. I've got the start of him, and just so long as I can keep it honorably, I'll do so. And I will never do another mean thing. From this day on dates my reform, for all I haven't been so awful mean. If Frank wins, as told him, my best wishes will go with him and her. This, I know, is not natural, but one might as well make the best of a defeat. I could easily slip around and shoot Frank, and then if Zoe wouldn't consent to be my wife, I could bring friends enough to carry her away and force her to terms; but the Lord forbid such a mean, villainous act. But, bahl, she was right, after all. She spoke about our child's play. Here I am, a boy of eighteen, in love—talking 'bout a wife and love, and such things; but, hang it, I do love her. A boy can love as well as a man, and a girl as well as a woman. I don't know about my sense, but I do know she's got as much as a woman of twenty-five. But that plagued ring!—that's what's hurting now. I'd like to know why she kept it blazing away at me. I know it's the same ring, and so them fellows must have found out who I was. If it costs me Zoe's love, it will be a lesson never to sit down in another gambling-house again, even if I am rejected from society of mankind. That ring will be a thorn in my side, for God only knows how long. But I'll abide the fiat of Fate, some weal or woe."

CHAPTER XXIX

ZOE LELAND'S PERIL.

It was on the day following that of Idaho Tom's visit to the floating island, that the beautiful Zoe Leland sat alone upon the island, keeping her dove-like watch over the bay, during the usual absence of her father and friends.

Her pretty face wore a thoughtful expression, and her restless eyes a vacant, dreamy and far-off look. That her mind was not as free, nor her heart as light as usual, was plainly perceptible. She swept the shores at times with an eager, anxious look. Sometimes she would start, with a quick, impatient movement, at sight of a moving object along the margin of the woods; but when she saw, by means of the glass which she always kept at hand, that it was either a wolf or deer, a look of disappointment would settle upon her face, and a sigh escape her lips.

As the moments wore away, she suddenly descried a canoe turn the headland, putting out between the lake and bay. By the aid of her glass she was enabled to see that the occupants were strangers. There were two of them, one an Indian, and the other a white man with a stout, heavy-set body and rough, bearded face.

The latter, who handled the paddle, permitted the canoe to come to a stand in the channel connecting the lake and bay, while he carefully scanned the island.

Zoe's first thoughts were of menacing danger. She knew, by the presence of the Indian, that both were enemies; and she was about proceeding to the large secret tent, to inform her father of her discovery, when she happened to observe a little object—a mere white speck—put out from the west shore and drift slowly toward the island.

A smile curved her lips; her eyes beamed with joy; and her face became radiant with some inward emotion. She knew what the tiny white object was: the little transport of Idaho Tom, coming, no doubt, with a message of love for her.

Feeling no fears of immediate danger from those out in the channel, she sat down to await the arrival of the little sail.

With eager impatience she watched it come skimming like a white-winged bird over the smooth waters, now leaping and dancing as though possessed of life, and realizing the joy its presence produced in the heart of the maiden.

The two strangers out in the channel still remained inactive, as if waiting for something or some one. But Zoe kept a close

watch upon them, as well as upon the little sail that fluttered on with its longed-for message—food for the young heart starving upon the lonely isle.

The maiden grew very restless and impatient, for the drifting object moved with provoking slowness, albeit a smart wind was blowing directly in its favor. And the nearer it came the slower it moved, as if to test her patience to the utmost.

"Creep on, you truant thing!" she exclaimed, petulantly, pacing to and fro along the edge of the island.

It drifted on within a rod of the island, when, to her surprise it became stationary. There it remained, rising and falling gently upon the waves, as if determined to advance no further. Why it had stopped Zoe could not tell, nor did she take time to think in the midst of her excitement; but turning, she stepped into a canoe, and seating herself, was soon moving toward the little transport.

A few strokes of the paddle carried the light canoe alongside the truant craft. At the same instant, to the maiden's horror, a pair of dusky, naked hands rose up from the water and seized hold of the canoe. Then the little love-sail was thrown quickly aside, and the shaven head of a hideous-looking Indian appeared from beneath.

A low cry of terror burst from Zoe's lips, and she sunk half fainting in the canoe.

Without scarcely rocking the boat, the savage sprung from the water into the craft, and seizing the paddle, drove the canoe around the island and away across the bay toward the channel where the savage and white man were waiting, no doubt, the result of this very demonstration.

Hubert Leland heard the half-horrified scream of his daughter, but ere he could appear from the tent in which he was at work, the canoe was several rods from shore. His first impulse was to rush to the little howitzer near, but a second thought convinced him that to bring the piece to bear upon the savage would be to destroy his child's life.

Almost frantic with excitement and grief, he rushed back into the tent where he had been spending the day, and when he came out again, he was accompanied by Jamison and Roberts.

"Man the canoe, boys—quick, for God's sake!" the father cried, almost wild with his emotions.

"Too late, Leland, too late! Look yonder!"

The savage with the maiden had joined the two strangers waiting in the channel, and together they had all disappeared from view around the headland into the lake.

"Oh, my God! my Zoe, my child is lost, lost!" moaned the father, in bitter anguish of heart.

"And what can we do in pursuing them?" asked Jamison.

"Fire the cannon, Jamison," cried Leland. "Perhaps its report will bring those Boy Hunters to our assistance."

Jamison sprung to the howitzer, and the next moment the thunderous crash of the piece rung forth in stunning echoes through the mountains.

Half an hour later two persons appeared on the north side of the bay, and glanced inquiringly away toward the island.

By the aid of Zoe's glass, Leland was enabled to make out who one of them was. It was Frank Caselton. The other was Billy Brady, though Leland knew only the former.

Leland sprung into a canoe and pushed out toward the boys.

The latter saluted him as the prow of his boat touched upon the beach.

"Are you alone, boys?" the old man asked, rising to his feet and leaping ashore.

"Yes, sir, we are. We heard the report of your howitzer and came down to see if you were in trouble."

"We are in trouble—distress, Frank," replied the old father, with a tremor in his voice. "The devils that haunt these shores like vultures, have carried my Zoe—my child away."

"Great heavens!" burst in a groan of agony from Frank Caselton's lips.

Hubert Leland remarked, with no little surprise, the emotions of apparent grief betrayed by the young hunter.

"A savage came," he said, "to the island; but how he got there I do not know. I heard Zoe's cry and went out. The red devil had her in one of our canoes and was rods away. To have fired upon him would have been to endanger the life of my child."

"Have you any idea where she will be taken to?" Frank asked.

"I am afraid she will be taken to Molock's den. That inhuman monster seems to be the spirit of evil that controls the satellites of Satan hereaways."

"Do you know where Idaho Tom is, Mr. Leland?"

"I do not. At last accounts he was at the cabin of the Mad Trapper."

"He would doubtless be of great assistance to you now, were he present. But how long since the capture of Zoe, Mr. Leland?"

"But a few minutes. They escaped by way of the lake."

"Then by a forced march they may be headed off. Billy and I will strike out at once, Mr. Leland, and endeavor to keep in sight of them that their course will not be lost. Perhaps, if you can spare the time, it would be well for you to see our friends, Mr. Leland, and send them on after us. Two of them are old hunters in experience, and would be of invaluable service in trailing the enemy. We'll hurry on to the lake and see which way they go."

"God speed you, boys," cried the old father; "you shall be rewarded for your kindness."

"I am already in your and Zoe's debt," replied Frank; "she rescued me from death, and now I have an opportunity to repay the act of mercy. Come, Billy, let's be off. You'll find the boys, Mr. Leland, a mile due west in the pass going up toward Carson."

With these words the boys were off at a run, keeping along the bay.

Mr. Leland was about setting out in search of the Boy Hunters' camp, when three figures came bounding from the woods.

"Ingins, old man!—a thousand of them!" shouted one of them in a clear voice.

Leland saw that the strangers were all boys, and at once came to the conclusion that they were Frank Caselton's companions. Without a word he turned, and leaping into the canoe, said:

"Jump in, boys."

The youths were not reluctant to obey, and sprung into the canoe, taxing it to its utmost capacity.

Hubert Leland plied the paddle with all his strength, and the little craft plowed its way through the crystal waters with wonderful rapidity.

Scarcely were they a hundred yards from shore when a perfect legion of red-skins burst into view and stretched along the beach for half a mile. But nearly all of them were armed with bows and arrows, and our friends escaped unharmed aboard the floating island.

CHAPTER XXX.

FRANK AND BILLY ON THE TRAIL.

FRANK and Billy hurried with all possible speed around the bay, reaching the lake just in time to see the white man and two savages disembark with their captive. They were, however, over a mile away, and by the time they had traversed this distance, the foe had disappeared. They had filled the two canoes with stones and sunk them in shallow water, where they could easily be got at in case of necessity.

Not far away the boys found the hoof-prints of two or three horses; and this discovery filled young Caselton with disappointment.

The tracks led away up the valley and from the indentations in the ground it was evident that the enemy had ridden fast.

"Billy," said Frank, after they had found out the course pursued by the maiden's captors, "shall we undertake to follow this trail alone?"

"And why not, Frank?" returned Billy.

"I thought you might be in favor of waiting till the boys came up."

"All of us couldn't fight our way into the Wolf Herder's den. Our only hopes in getting the girl is by stratagem, and the less there are to perform, the better."

"We might gain admittance to the outlaw's stronghold by the same means with which we escaped from there. We know where Bold Heart concealed the rope."

"Yis, but lookey here now, Frankie; how do we know but that we're getting ahead of the hounds?"

"In what way, Billy?"

"Bedad, and we don't know whether the gal was taken to the den or not."

"There is not a doubt of it, Billy. These hoof-prints point in that direction, and, it is within reason and possibility, that Zoe has been taken directly to that place."

"All roight, Frank; heave ahead and Billy Brady will foller, or lead whin necessary. And if iver mees git within that hell-hole again, moind what I tells yees, I'll let every wolf outen that pen and set him to picking owld Molock's bones."

The boys took up the trail and set out to follow it. It ran along the valley and finally turned up the gorge leading toward Molock's den. This left no doubt in the minds of the youths as to where Zoe had been taken.

When within a mile or so of Molock's stronghold the youths concealed themselves to await the coming of night.

To the impatient boy-lover, Frank Caselton, the hours seemed to drag on leaden feet—the sun to stand motionless above the distant mountain-tops.

At length, however, shadows began to gather in the valleys, creep stealthily up the mountain steep and thicken along the sky.

The boys now crept from their hiding-place and pushed on toward the den of the Wolf-Herder. When they reached the ledge overhanging the place it was pitchy dark. The sky was overcast with a dull, leaden gray cloud. A white mist hovered low in the valleys. The mountains lent the darkness of their mighty forms to the surrounding gloom.

The boys began groping about in search of the rope concealed there a few days previous. For an hour or more their labor threatened to be in vain, but, finally, the sought-for object was found.

One end of the rope was then made fast to a stout bush near the edge of the precipice, and the other end lowered over into the valley.

"Now, Billy," said Frank, "the tug of war begins."

"And I am ready for the fun," said Billy.

"But, suppose when we climb down that rope we find a savage there to receive us with a tomahawk?"

"And yees moight as well suppose that whin yees go to heaven one av the apostles will knock yees back to earth wid a club."

"Well, then, which one goes first?" asked Frank.

"Mees, by all means," said Billy; "yees know that I've been a sailor-b'y, and to go up and down a rhope is as 'asy as falling on the ice. Yes, Frankie, mees 'll go down and reconnoiter, and if I find the way open, I'll jerk the rhope like blazes and thin you'll come down."

"All right, Billy; but be careful. The least false movement may defeat our object and cost us our lives."

"Och, and to be sure," responded Billy, and throwing himself upon the ground, he seized the rope, and crawling backward disappeared over the ledge.

Frank sat down and grasped the rope, as if by its motions and jars, he hoped to be able to judge of the success of Billy's adventure.

A deadly hush, broken only by the eternal howling of the hungry beasts below, pervaded the night.

With anxious, beating heart, young Caselton waited alone upon the cliff. The white mist thickened around him until he seemed floating on a sea of fog.

He was suddenly started from his silent thoughts by a sullen boom that came quivering up from the direction of Tahoe.

"Ah!" he exclaimed to himself, "they are in trouble at the lake!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

ZOE IN PRISON.

THE two men—savage and white man—that Zoe had sighted in the strait between the bay and lake, proved to be Molock, the Wolf-Herder, and one of his followers. And they were there for the purpose of assisting their friend in the abduction of the maiden, in case their help was needed.

The day previous Molock, in skulking about the lake, had seen Idaho Tom send his message of love to Zoe by means of his little transport, and had seen him receive the reply.

The novelty of the young man's idea suggested another to the crafty brain of Molock, and he proceeded to put it into execution. And he was successful, his plans culminating in the capture of Zoe in the manner already seen.

Three horses were in waiting in the woods near where they landed, to carry the captive and captors away; and so thorough had all the villain's plans been laid, and so skillfully and successfully had they been executed, that, long before night, the whole party reached the stronghold in the mountain's fastness.

Zoe was imprisoned in the same dark, dismal room wherein our young friends, the Boy Hunters, had been confined. Despair had taken possession of her young heart, and, half-stupefied with terror, she took but a passing notice of things around her. At

times her brain seemed enveloped in a maze of giddy horror that made her situation so vaguely indistinct, she seemed in a terrible nightmare which she could not shake off.

As unsusceptible to all human feeling as the villainous Molock was, he saw that his captive was like a frail, tender flower, and would stand but little exposure and ill-treatment. Therefore, in order to revive the drooping spirits of the girl, he told glaring falsehoods concerning his object in capturing her, and made many fair promises that he never intended to fulfill.

A rude couch had been constructed for her in one corner of her prison-room. A chair and a cup of water had been given her also.

As soon as she was alone, Zoe lifted her eyes and gazed wildly about the room. The rough, barren walls; the high, smoke-begrimed roof; and the dismal light, presented a cold, cheerless sight.

Finally she arose to her feet, and walking to the little window over the wolf-pen, looked out. She saw the seething wave of wolfish forms before her, and she grew sick and faint at heart. Reeling away across the floor, she threw herself upon her chair, and burst into a paroxysm of grief and tears.

Thus the day wore away and night came on, dark and dismal, bringing a corresponding gloom to the heart of the maiden.

Shortly after dark, Molock brought her a dim, sputtering lamp, whose flickering light seemed to set a dozen ghostly shadows dancing over the walls. He also brought her some cold meat and hard, stale bread for supper.

"Don't take on, little Miss," the villain said, seeing her bowed down with grief; "you'll git out of this safe and sound if yer friends will come down handsomely with the solid metal."

"But they have no money, if that is what you mean," Zoe sobbed.

The man drew from his pocket, and held up between his thumb and forefinger, the diamond ring which Zoe wore at the time of her capture. The villain had torn it from her finger while they were yet upon the lake.

"They have," he said, "the rest of the set to which that belongs, and that'll buy you out of here. I don't want you—only holdin' ye for ransom, and ye needn't waste a solitary tear."

"My friends have no jewels."

"They hain't, eh? Ugh, humph! I understand. Them boys shat's been hangin' around Tahoe, like vultures around a carcass, are your friends; and they know sumthin' 'bout the rest of the jewels, or 'd ort to, fur they stole 'em from me. This ring is part o' the set. I pawned it to a friend a year ago for likker, and he run off afore I could redeem it, and so now it's drifted hum to me."

"How came the ring and jewels yours?" Zoe asked, half-indignantly, while her eyes swam in tears.

"Bought 'em," was the laconic reply, given with a searching glance of the speaker's baleful, blood-shot eyes.

"You did not buy them," was Zoe's response; "you stole them!"

"Whist, now! and I believe I'm on a trail," exclaimed Molock, reflectively. "Hain't you the gal that was in the coach that was robbed in Purgatory Pass one night last spring?"

"Yes! and you are one of the robbers!" Zoe responded, her eyes flashing with loathsome scorn.

Molock broke into a low, sinister laugh.

"That was purty well done, wasn't it?" he finally asked. "You wouldn't think now, little 'un, would ye, that I war that ole detective that rid in the coach with you? But I am that very identikal sinner, and it war in my hand ye placed yer jewels 'stead of yer father's."

"You are a coward to gloat over so mean an act to a helpless girl," retorted Zoe. "They were my poor dead mother's jewels, and I prized them on that account."

"I prized 'em on account of their value," was the heartless villain's reply.

Zoe turned away and refused further conversation with him; when the villain went out, fastening the door behind him.

Zoe heard the sound of his heavy footsteps descending the ladder. A door was slammed shut, then all subsided into quietude.

The silence that followed became oppressive to the captive's heart; but it had lasted only for a few minutes, when suddenly a heavy weight fell upon the roof, with a dull thump, that sent a slight jar through the room.

Zoe started to her feet, and in breathless suspense, listened. But all had again subsided into silence, and remained so for full five minutes, when a sound was again heard upon the roof. It was a very slight sound, however—not louder than a rat would make running over the shingles—and filled Zoe's breast with a vague hope.

The maiden kept her eyes lifted upward to the roof that was barely perceptible in the dim light. Only the faintest outline of the shingles and worm-eaten rafters could be seen; but, notwithstanding this fact, she was enabled to see a board suddenly lifted aside by some invisible hand. Her hope grew stronger, and a cry of joy rose to her lips, but some invisible power suppressed the cry.

With eager, burning eyes she watched the opening on the roof grow larger and larger; as board after board was carefully removed. The hole had been enlarged to nearly two feet each way, when the maiden suddenly beheld a white, frowsy head, and a brown, boyish face, appear in the opening and gaze down upon her.

It was a strange face—a face so indistinctly seen that it banished all her cherished hopes from her breast.

CHAPTER XXXII

TO THE RESCUE.

THE face that gazed down upon Zoe in her prison-room was that of the daring young hunter, Billy Brady.

The maiden had entertained such high hopes of seeing a face that she knew—the face of a friend coming to her aid—that the disappointment which followed cast a cold, sinister expression over the face so faintly seen in the dim, uncertain light above.

"Hist!" she suddenly heard whispered in a sharp, aspirate tone; "don't shpeak, little Miss, if yees vally loife worth the saving. I'm Billy Brady, a woid Irish b'y, and Frank Caselton is not fur away."

The words sent a thrill of joy to the maiden's heart. She clasped her hands over her breast and murmured a prayer of thanks.

Then she lifted her eyes and again scanned the face of the youth gazing down upon her. And how different it appeared, now that she knew it was the face of a friend.

The first thing Billy did, after he had quieted the maiden's fears, was to lower the end of the rope into the room and then let himself down.

On tip-toe he advanced to the side of the maiden and whispered, softly:

"I've come to hilp yees out av here, little lady; and yees hev to go out through the roof up there. I'm going outside to reconnoiter a wee bit, and whin I return and drop the rope, tie it carefully around yer waist and I'll hoist yees up like a kite."

Almost wild with delight, the maiden signified her willingness to follow his instructions.

Billy turned and examined the door of the prison. Originally it had been made to fasten on the inside. The heavy clasps were still on the door and the socket in the jam. All that was wanted to fasten the door from intrusion was simply a bar. As Billy noticed this he shook his frowsy head in a significant manner; and turning he seized the rope and was about to climb up to the roof when Zoe approached him and asked:

"You said Frank Caselton was near; where is he now?"

"Up on the cliff, not fifty feet above you."

"Thank you," she said, and a faint smile of inward joy flitted over her pale face.

Billy acknowledged her thanks with a polite bow, then turned and scampered up the rope like a cat.

Once more upon the roof the fearless youth was not long in coming to a decision as to his next movement. Drawing up the rope from the prison-room he dropped it over the eaves of the house, and then cautiously lowered himself to the ground.

Crouching close against the base of the cabin, the youth listened for some sound that would indicate the whereabouts of the enemy. He heard voices within the building—the voices of Molock and his confederates, who appeared to be engaged in a game of cards.

"Och, now, and if Bold Heart was here I'll bet he'd march in and banter the gentlemen for a hand in the game," mused the lad; "but, while they're playing at one game, Billy Brady will play at another."

So saying the youth crept around the cabin and along the stone-wall that fenced in the wolves. He soon came to the gate opening into the pen. He found it was fastened on the outside by a bar held in its place by a heavy log leaning against it. Placing his shoulder against the log he threw it aside; then he withdrew the bar which he placed under his arm for future use, and throwing open the gate ran for his life.

Back around the cabin he darted, and, placing the bar, heavy as it was, between his teeth, hastily climbed the rope to the roof of the house.

With a wild, frenzied howl the wolves poured from their prison-pen in a perfect stream of shaggy forms.

Billy hastily descended into Zoe's room, and with the bar, procured for the purpose, securely fastened the door on the inside.

"Now, my little lady friend," he said, "your time has come. Let me tole the rhope around yees, for mees can tole a sailor's knot that'll not let yees fall."

The maiden yielded to his suggestions without a word of dissent, and the lad wound and twined the end of the rope around her form so as to give as little pain as possible. This done he again ascended to the roof, then with a steady nerve he drew the light, fairy form of the maiden from the prison to the house-top. She was trembling with terror and affright, but, in his droll, good-natured way, the youth succeeded in restoring her usual composure and in strengthening her courage for the next terrible leap, as it were, for life and freedom.

Molock and his men, by this time, had detected an unusual noise without, and quitting their cards they grasped their weapons and rushed out to inquire the cause of it.

The hungry beasts, maddened now with their liberty, came pouring around the house and attacked the outlaw and his two savage coadjutors. In an instant one of the latter was down, while a sea of shaggy forms surged around him like a maelstrom—tearing and gnawing at his quivering flesh. Molock and the other Indian escaped into the house, but as they had not before closed the doors a dozen desperate, maddened beasts were already in the room. They were driven up the ladder into the loft.

At the head of the stairs Molock stopped to rest. He was panting like an overworked ox. His face wore a wild look, and his eyes glared like coals of fire. He had been shocked by the terrible tide of vengeance turned so suddenly upon him. He could not form the remotest idea as to how this critical state of affairs had been brought about—how the wolves had escaped.

After a few minutes' pause he advanced and unbarred Zoe's prison-door and tried to open it; but it refused to yield. It was fastened on the inside. The outlaw kicked it, and pounded upon it with his fist till the whole building trembled under the blows. But finding it would not yield his fury burst forth in a storm of horrible oaths that were revolting to human ears.

Billy and Zoe heard every blow and every oath from their position on the house. They filled the maiden's heart with terror and increased her anxiety to escape from the desperate villain's reach. She felt that there was no danger she would not risk to gain a point of safety.

Billy untied the rope from her waist, and leaving the end of it in her possession, with instructions how to proceed, he swung from the cabin and ascended to the ledge.

"What in the name of Heaven has happened down there, Billy?" was the first words that Frank said to him; "where have you been all this time? and what doing? Is Zoe there?"

"Yes; she'll be along in a minute," replied Billy, pulling the rope slightly, as a signal to the maiden to prepare to follow.

With a steady hand Zoe tied the rope around her form, then signaled to her friends that all was ready.

The rope was gradually drawn taut. The maiden swung from the roof as she was lifted from her feet. An involuntary cry of terror pealed from her lips when she felt herself swinging to and fro in mid-air.

Carefully Frank and Billy drew up the dangling burden. When it appeared near the edge of the precipice, Frank threw himself along the rock, and reaching over, lifted the maiden in his strong arms to the summit of the ledge. But Zoe was perfectly helpless. She had fainted! or was she dead!

CHAPTER XXXIII

"VENGEANCE IS MINE, SAITH THE LORD."

THE great round moon burst suddenly through the veil of clouds, and lit up the desolate valley in which was located the den of Molock, the Wolf-Herder. It shone upon a scene of tenderness and love, and upon a scene of tragic horror—the former upon the ledge, the latter in the rock-girded valley.

Over the motionless form of the beautiful Zoe Leland knelt the figure of noble Frank Caselton, chafing the temples and

palms of the fair being in hopes of resuscitating the almost faded spark of life. He had wrapped the tender form in his woolen hunting-jacket to protect it from the chill, damp night air. In fact everything within his power was done to save her; and finally, to his infinite joy, he had the extreme pleasure of knowing that his administrations were not in vain. She opened her eyes, and gazing wildly about her into the misty moonlight, asked in a flighty voice:

"Father, why don't Frank Caselton ever come back to the island?"

Frank was astonished. Why this question from the lips of the half-delirious girl? A second thought set his heart to throbbing wildly with joy, and his brain became intoxicated with a sense of indescribable pleasure. Bending over the girl, he whispered, tenderly:

"Zoe, Frank Caselton is here by your side."

She started with a little cry, as if aroused by the magic of his voice. She gazed up into his face and around with a conscious, yet bewildered look.

"You are safe, Zoe; rest easy," Frank said.

"Then it really is you, Frank," she said, feebly.

"It is. You have had quite an adventure, Zoe, and a narrow escape. You have been in the den of Molock, the Wolf-Herder."

"I mistrusted the fact when I saw a great herd of wolves from my prison window."

"He will not carry off another girl soon," Frank said; "my friend, Billy Brady, who rescued you from the den, is already punishing the wretched villain."

True enough, the inimitable Billy was busily engaged in a work of vengeance upon the head of Molock.

He carried stone after stone, many of them over a hundred pounds in weight, and rolled them over the precipice onto the roof of the cabin. Of course the huge missiles crashed through the roof and floor as though they had been paper; and the outlaw and savage in the loft now discovered that the vengeance of an enraged enemy had overtaken them. They hovered close against the wall to escape death, but the rocks continued to rain down upon the house until it became necessary for the two wretched men to seek safety elsewhere.

The wolves were sweeping to and fro across the valley like scudding clouds. The outlaws' horses and tame buffaloes had drawn their pickets and were thundering here and there with wild whinny and terrified bellow, in frantic efforts to escape from the pursuing animals.

With hasty footsteps Molock and his man descended the ladder. The wolves had all left the cabin and joined in the chase of the horses and buffaloes.

"Unque," said Molock, in terror, "we can reach the tunnel before the wolves ketch us, but we'll have to run for it."

"Yes," was Unque's reply, and he fell dead at Molock's feet, crushed into a shapeless mass by a huge stone that came crashing from above.

With alarm the now terrified outlaw rushed from the cabin and ran rapidly toward the tunnel opening into the valley.

In the now clear moonlight, Billy and Frank saw the fleeing villain, when the latter cried out:

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, and I will surely repay."

The outlaw merely glanced back as he ran on. A horse pursued by two score of wolves suddenly swept between him and the mouth of the cavern. The hungry beasts saw their keeper and turned upon him.

Molock saw his danger—that he was cut off from the tunnel, and turning to the right, he ran toward the great wall of towering rock.

In his hand he carried an Indian hatchet—a formidable weapon in the hand of a man struggling for his life.

The wolves were weak and clumsy from long confinement and starvation, but rendered frantic by hunger.

Reaching the wall, Molock placed his back against it, and with his hatchet began to hew right and left among the beasts. He was a powerful and active man, and quick and deadly fell the sodden blows upon the wrangling, snarling horde. He kept a space before him clear. The earth soon became piled with dead and wounded beasts around him. He would soon be protected by a wall of shaggy bodies; but the poll of the hatchet became wet with dripping gore. It followed down the handle and made it slippery; and in the midst of the conflict the weapon shot from the outlaw's hand and flew far beyond his reach.

A cry of awful agony burst from the strong lungs of the wicked wretch. He was at the mercy of his beasts, but he fought on—beat them off with his great fists—fought with foot and hand nerved by the desperation born of despair.

But this uneven conflict could not last long.

Little by little the great man's strength fails him. His breath comes quick and hard—almost in gasps. The wolves press closer and closer, and finally roll forward like a wave.

A wall of agony rose from the valley.

The moon hid her face behind a great black cloud.

And Frank and Billy, exchanging significant glances, turned their backs upon the valley of death.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BILLY BRADY IN TROUBLE.

FRANK CASELTON and Billy Brady at once set out for Lake Tahoe with the rescued maiden. The way was rough and difficult, and rendered very dangerous by the gloom of night.

Billy acted as guide, while Frank escorted the fair Zoe along the ragged way.

After hours of weary traveling they reached the lake, when they were met by an unexpected difficulty. Savages were swarming along the shores, and in his search for a canoe, in which to escape to the island, Billy Brady ran into a party of savages and was captured. Frank and Zoe were not far away, but fortunately their presence was not discovered, and they escaped their friend's misfortune.

Billy struggled like a young tiger, but the odds were against him and he was compelled to succumb. He was disarmed, and at once marched back into a narrow defile, where a halt was made and a fire lighted.

As the flames flared out and cast their light upon the scene, the young prisoner glanced around him; and his heart sunk with hopelessness in his breast when his eyes fell upon the tall, powerful form and stolid, sinister face of the Indian, Tall Pine. The warrior was seated upon a rock a little to one side, smoking a clay pipe. His eyes were cast downward, and a sullen, morose look clouded his stoical face. He seemed engaged in thought. He never looked up—never glanced toward the captive.

A short consultation was at once held regarding the disposal of the prisoner, and they were not long in coming to a decision. Billy was thrown prostrate upon his back. His arms and legs were then spread out and forked sticks driven over them, thereby pinioning him to the ground.

What awful torture the youth was about to undergo he never knew; for presently Tall Pine arose to his feet and uttered an exclamation that called the attention of his friends from the object of their intended barbarity.

Then for fully ten minutes Tall Pine addressed the party in his native tongue, and that Billy was the subject of his remarks was evident from the glances that he occasionally gave the youth.

Billy could not understand a word that was said, but he knew, or at least supposed he did, the import of the speaker's words. He believed he was pleading for his—Billy's—life, that the promise he had made the Boy Hunters but a few days previous might be honorably fulfilled. He had promised by the Great Spirit that the first prisoner taken by the red-skins should be set at liberty to consummate the conditions of his parole; and that there was honor in this savage, no difference how strong his ill-feelings toward Billy were, was manifested in his pleadings for the lad's life.

After Tall Pine had concluded his speech, a general conversation ensued, which finally terminated by Tall Pine drawing the pinions from over Billy's limbs, and bidding the lad to rise.

"The pale-face boy is now in Tall Pine's power," the Indian said, as the youth stood before him, his hands crossed behind his back; "he knows the boy who gave Tall Pine his life, and Tall Pine remembers his promise, and he will keep it. Let the pale-face go free into the woods; but when he is taken again he shall die."

"All roight, me honey," said Billy, with a bow of mock politeness, and turning, he walked slowly away into the shadows. But no sooner was he concealed from the view of his captors than he took to heels, and ran, as he never did before, toward the lake.

Reaching the water, he plunged in, and struck out for the floating island. He was an excellent swimmer, and was soon out of reach of the shore, his lithe form cleaving the waters without scarcely creating an audible sound.

Meanwhile Frank Caselton was not idle. He could not, nor would it have been prudent to, leave Zoe to go in search of Billy. His first duty was to see that the maiden was safe, then

go to his friend's assistance. He well knew that she would be safe nowhere except upon the island; and while he was wondering how he could get there, a canoe, with a couple of savages in it, put into the shore within a rod of where they were concealed.

The savages landed, and pulling the canoe partly on the beach, went away into the woods. As soon as they were out of hearing, Frank led Zoe down to the water's edge, and launching the canoe, embarked with her therein.

In a very few moments they were beyond reach of danger from the shore; but there were other canoes besides their own afloat, and they were compelled to bend their course occasionally to avert being run into.

Suddenly Zoe grasped Frank by the arm in an excited manner, and whispered softly:

"Frank, some one is hanging to our canoe!"

Frank drew his revolver and turning upon the seat, gazed along the edge of the canoe. The darkness was so intense that he was compelled to look some time before he could perceive the outlines of a human head alongside of the boat.

There was an ominous click as the youth drew back the hammer of his revolver.

"Whist there, now, Frankie!" a voice suddenly said in a low tone, "and b' the Mother av Moses it's me, Billy Brady."

"Thank the Lord for that," murmured Frank, returning his revolver to its sheath, and assisting Billy into the canoe.

"Then you gave the enemy the slip, eh, Billy?"

"No, I got off on parole—on the strength of that Tall Pine affair thit mees were telling yees about."

"Indeed! I had no idea that the savage would keep his word," replied Frank.

"Nor mees; but, Holy Virgin! the wather, the shore and the air is full av red-skins to-night."

"Hark!"

The dips of a paddle and the swash of water was heard near by, and before the trio had time for a second thought, the side of their canoe was stove in by the prow of a strange craft running afoul of them.

A cry of horror pealed from Zoe's lips as together the three sunk in the cold waters of the bay.

CHAPTER XXXV.

IDAHO TOM AND THE MAD TRAPPER ON THE MOVE.

By a dim fire that burned on the hearth of the Mad Trapper's cabin, sat the old borderman himself and Idaho Tom, up to their eyes in whisky.

Without it was night, black and gloomy.

The door of the cabin was closed and barred. The little window also had been fastened up, and every available point strengthened and guarded with extreme care, as though danger was apprehended.

"Yes, yes," the trapper was saying, when we intrude upon the privacy of their conversation, "the days of peace are all over with hereaways, Thomas. Old Molock has been stirred up, and he in turn has stirred up the red-skins."

"And one might as well stir up a hornet's nest," added Idaho Tom.

"Yes, the condemned vagrants are mean and devilish; and they're swarmin' over from the foot-hills like muskeeters. Shouldn't wonder if we'd be driven out o' here in less than a week."

"But I can't see, for the life of me, why—" began Tom, but his words were here cut short by a clicking sound starting suddenly up in the big pine chest in the corner to the left of the fire-place.

The old trapper started to his feet, and glancing toward Tom, at the same time assuming an attitude of intense listening, raised his finger as if to enjoin silence upon the lips of his companion.

The clicking in the corner lasted for only a moment or two.

"Well, if I must, I must; for I won't ask you to go out," the trapper said to his companion, as he turned and advanced toward the chest. Reaching it, he inserted a key, turned it, and then lifted the lid, revealing to the astonished gaze of the youth a telegraphic battery.

"I thought so from the first night I staid here, friend Dee," the youth said, pointing to the instrument.

"I 'lowed you'd hear the thing click; but then it's no use keepin' a secret from a friend," replied the trapper, with an air of philosophical gravity. "That, Tom, is an undefiled, giniwine, lightning'-geared telegraph machine; and I'm the child that fingers this end of the communicatin' thingumbob. Zoe Leland 'arned

me to play on it. It's connected with the floatin' island on the bay, over a mile distant. I was called, jist now, and I'm goin' to answer, 'Here,' and he adjusted the connecting wire, and thumbed off the word in a twinkling.

The next instant the battery began a rapid clicking. Dee stood with his head partly turned, listening closely to catch every word; and Tom noticed, as the sound continued, that the trapper's face assumed a painful expression.

At length the sound ceased. Zedekiah drew a long, heavy breath, and glancing toward Tom, exclaimed:

"My God, Tom!"

"What is it, Zed?"

"Zoe Leland is a captive!"

Tom groaned in spirit.

"Who captured her, Zed?" he asked.

"Wait a minute, and I'll find out."

Zed asked the question over the wire.

"An Indian, they say," Dee replied, after receiving an answer. "They don't know how he ever got to the island, but long before night he got there somehow or other, and carried her off in one of their own canoes. Strikes me as being a queer thing, Tom."

"Why haven't we known this sooner?"

"Because we haven't been here, nor down to the bay," Leland says. "He's been tryin' to git me here for four long hours, and you see we've only been here a little while. That explains the hull thing."

"Well, what's to be done?"

"We're wanted at the island, right away. It is being besieged by a hundred red-skins that seem bent on its capture. Leland says we'll have to approach with great caution."

"Is any one in pursuit of Zoe's captors, did he say?"

"I'll ask," said the trapper-operator, fingering the instrument rapidly.

The answer was soon flashed back.

"Frank Caselton and a friend are in pursuit. The rest of the Boy Hunters are here on the island, fighting nobly for us."

A look of disappointment clouded Tom's face, and, in a bitter tone, he replied:

"I dare say that curse of this land, Mat Molock, the Wolf-Herder, has got her in his den ere this. And if so, what can two boys do toward rescuing her? My opinion is that Zoe Leland is lost."

"It may be, Thomas, but let us hope for the best till we are positive. But, Tom, will you go to the island with me now?"

"I hardly know what to do—whether to strike out for Molock's quarters, and lend my aid in rescuing Zoe, or go down to the bay."

"Tom," said Dee, seriously, "I verily believe that you are in love with Zoe Leland."

Tom blushed, but finally stammered out:

"I am not ashamed of the truth, friend Dee. I do love Zoe Leland with all my heart, and have from the hour I first saw her. My love told me that the boy Albert, who came here that memorable night, was Zoe in disguise, notwithstanding your efforts to deceive me in the matter."

The old trapper smiled, sadly, and replied:

"I b'lieve you could see through a millstone, Tom, if you recognized Zoe in her disguise that night. But then, I alers b'lieved you loved that girl. She's a cherribim, Tom, if thar were ever one on earth. She's good enough, purty enough and sweet enough for an angel to marry, I do solemnly believe."

"That's what I'm afraid of—that she is too good for a young vagabond like me."

"Heavens, listen!" It was the old trapper that uttered the exclamation.

The sullen boom of a cannon rolled up from the lake and burst forth anew in a hundred mountain echoes.

"They're having it hot and heavy down there," said Tom, with a nervous start.

"Let's git ready and go down," replied Dee; "what say you, Thomas?"

"I am ready for anything, Zed," answered Tom.

The two secured their weapons and plunged out into the night.

The sky was overcast, and a dense fog hung over the valley and hills.

Down the gloomy pass the two men turned their faces, and moved with hasty footsteps.

They hurried on in silence for some distance, when Idaho Tom finally said:

"Zedekiah, I must admit that the past month has been the most eventful one of my life."

"Why so, Tom?" asked the borderman.

"Because I have been completely puzzled and mystified all the time."

"Well, what about?"

"Things around Tahoe; the secret connected with the floating island and other things, down to your connection with the whole."

"Don't let that, this, or anything bother your brain now, Tom," replied Dee. "I'll explain everything one of these days. I know things you speak of look queer to a stranger, but then, it is the object of those interested in the matter that they should wear an air of mystery so as to keep the red-skins away. But, dang 'em, they don't 'pear to skeer worth a Continental. Rest assured, Tom, that thar is nothin' wrong about any of this apparent mystery that puzzles you."

"But, Dee, those two men that we buried the other day were friends of yours, were they not?"

"Wal, ya-as, they war, Tom," the trapper replied, with some hesitation.

"And were they not down to Virginia City, not very long ago?" questioned Tom.

"Yes, a few days afore they war killed by the red heathens. But I should think you knowed all about that, Tom," was the response, that started Tom slightly.

"Why should I, Zed?"

"Cause, didn't you play poker with them?"

"Yes, I believe I did."

"And didn't they scoop you outen a diamond ring?"

"Yes, they did; and I saw that ring to-day on Zoe Leland's finger."

"The boys give it to her, for it was her mother's ring, that she prized very dearly."

"Indeed?" exclaimed Tom, in the deepest surprise.

"It was taken from her," Zedekiah continued, "bout two or three months ago by the road-agents, while passing through Purgatory valley in the stage-coach. And, Tom, its being in your possession looked a deetle suspicious. The matter was placed in the hands of detectives to work out in hopes of gettin' the rest of the jewelry taken at the same time, also, to watch you, and find out your headquarters, and capter the hull caboodle. But, Tom, I never b'lieved you war a road-agent, and so that's jist why I've told you what I have."

"I thank you very much for telling me, Zed; but does Zoe know that your friends won the ring from me at poker?"

"Yas."

Tom sighed regretfully, and after a moment's silence responded:

"Zed, I tell you I am no road-agent nor robber. That ring was given me by the clerk of the 'Ophir Exchange,' in consideration of a valuable service rendered him. He told me at the time that it had been pawned at the saloon for a keg of whisky, but, as it was not redeemed within the stipulated time, it became the clerk's property."

"I believe you, Tom—every word you have told me, and shall to the last. But, lad, as we are now comin' near the lake, we'd better look a leetle out for red-skins."

"How are we going to get over to the island when we get to the bay, Zed?"

"Trust that part to me, Tom," replied the trapper.

The two moved on now in silence, and soon came to the margin of the woods skirting the bay. Within the shadows they paused and glanced out upon the beach. The moon, peeping through the clouds just then, showed them a number of shadowy forms moving along the shore to the right and left of their position.

"Dar'n't make a break here," Zedekiah whispered.

Keeping within the shadows, they stole around to the southwest side of the bay, and again paused and listened. All was silent here. The Indians appeared to have concentrated their force all on the northern side of the bay. At least, this was the surmise of Zed and Tom, founded upon the extreme silence that prevailed along this part of the shore; to their surprise, however, they were suddenly startled by a low moan.

Tom uttered a low exclamation of surprise, while the Mad Trapper chuckled as if with suppressed laughter.

Looking through the parted foliage before them, both saw a red-skin seated in a canoe, writhing and shuddering in all the agonies of death.

"Ah! friend trapper!" exclaimed Tom, in a dry, husky tone, "it is a savage fast in that infernal machine, one of the mysteries of Tahoe!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A COLLISION ON THE LAKE.

AGAIN the old trapper chuckled with delight over Tom's excitement.

"Boy," he said, "be you afraid of that canoe?"

"I am not superstitious, but I can't account for the mysterious power with which that craft seems endowed," replied the youth.

"Wal, if we go to the island we'll have to go in that very skiff, Tom."

"Never! I've been there, Zed."

The trapper's tall form shook with suppressed laughter.

"I'll work it, Tom," he finally replied. "I think I know what ails the durned thing."

"Well, I daresay you do," declared the boy.

"Come along then, my lad."

Out on to the open beach glided the borderman, and close behind him followed Idaho Tom.

The moon was again hidden behind a cloud and darkness hung over the face of all.

The two moved down to the water's edge, and found that the enchanted skiff was out some ten or fifteen feet from shore. The savage seemed conscious of their approach, and endeavored to liberate himself from his agonizing position, but all in vain.

The Mad Trapper waded into the water and hauled the canoe ashore. Then he stepped into it, and catching the savage by the girdle jerked him up off the seat. The act liberated him from his helpless position, and with an apparent cry of delight the savage sprung from the skiff and bounded away into the woods.

The Mad Trapper roared with laughter.

"I'd laugh, too, if I could see the point," said Tom, in perplexity.

"Wal, I reckon it are a sockdolager to them as don't understand science; but the nub of the hall thing is right here, Thomas. Under this seat is a galvanic battery of great power, the poles, which are slender wires, attached to each of these oars right where the hands grasp them. Here, you can feel 'em."

Tom stepped into the craft, and upon examination found that there was a wire running from the extremities of the box, which composed the oarsman's seat, up to the row-locks, thence along the under side of the oar to the end where the hand was fastened upon it.

"Now then," continued the trapper, "you might grab one of these oars and hold it till doomsday and it wouldn't affect you; and you might grasp it with both hands and it wouldn't harm ye if ye stood up, but if ye'd set down on that box-lid, then you'd catch goss; for the box is so constructed that as soon as one sets down on it an electric current is turned on, and the heavier the man, the stronger the current. And once a hold of the plagued thing it's purty hard to let up without help, or less ye know how to work it. But an Ingin will pull away at the oars, and that makes it all the worse on him. That's all thar is 'bout it, Tom. But if you want it 'lustrated take this seat."

"No, thanks, my gay old philosopher. As I said before, I have had a taste of your infernal nerve-tearing machine, and I don't care about trying it again. I have heard of galvanic batteries, but never have seen one, nor had any idea of their mysterious power, else I might have mistrusted the truth of the matter. But of all the ideas, this one gets me. What in wonder can be the object in it, anyhow?"

Dee raised the box-lid and threw the apparatus out of gear, then seating himself upon the box, seized the oars and drove the skiff rapidly out into the bay. When some rods from the shore he said:

"You asked me what object thar is in this outfit: it is to keep Ingins and boys from botherin' the skiff when one comes ashore and leaves it to look around awhile."

"Well, it's a capital contrivance, I must frankly admit, Zed; and—"

His words were here cut short by a cannon-ball that came screaming through the air so close to their heads that both Tom and Zed dodged like ducks.

"By the ghost of Caesar! that war a close shave, friend trapper," exclaimed the youth.

"I guess they think we're enemies," said Dee; "but fur the life of me, I can't see how they tell in this confounded fog who's on the lake at all, and who ar'n't."

"Maybe they were just firing to skeer the red-skins away, for it is impossible to see anything creeping through this fog—

heavens!"

Crash went the prow of their swift-moving skiff into the side of a canoe whose presence there was unknown, so deep and dense were the mist and gloom.

A cry of terror went up from the lips of the unknown party, the shrill, sharp voice of a woman was heard.

The next moment the unfortunate voyagers were floundering and struggling in the waves.

"Och! Mother av Moses!" cried one of the crew, in a loud, excited voice, "the red divils will kill us now!"

"Help me, Billy, for God's sake, with Zoe; she is drowning!"

The voice of the speakers sounded familiar, and their words told Tom and Zed of the predicament they were in.

"It's some of our friends, Zed!" exclaimed Tom, peering into the gloom before them.

"Who be you there?" asked the trapper, in a subdued tone, but the confusion made by the swashing water drowned his voice.

He spoke louder.

"Oh, Blessed Vargin! and it's ould Torpedo," was the joyful reply of Billy Brady. "Hilp, mon, we're drownin'! Yees busted our old tub, and b' the powers we've got the swate young angel!"

Before the last word had died upon the youth's lips, Zedekiah ran the skiff alongside the struggling trio, and with the assistance of Tom, Zoe was lifted up into the craft. But she was already unconscious.

Billy and Frank were next taken aboard, and the happy youths could scarcely restrain a shout of joy and triumph.

"This is a bad state of affairs," Frank said, "not that it hurts Billy and I, but on Zoe's account. Had you been enemies instead of friends we would all have perished."

"Very likely you would," replied Tom, "but, old friend, I am glad to meet you, and know that you have rescued Miss Leland."

The old trapper gave up the oars to Idaho Tom, while he took the wet, dripping form of the maiden in his arms, and endeavored to restore her to consciousness.

A deep silence now fell upon the party, so eager were all for the restoration of the fair girl. Only the dip of the oars, the heavy breathing of the oarsman, and the swash of the water broke the unnatural silence. Deep and depressing hung the gray fog over the bay.

Not until all had been assured of Zoe's recovery by words from her own lips, was that death-like pall lifted from the hearts of the little crew, nor did one venture to speak above a whisper. When this assurance, however, was guaranteed them, Idaho Tom exclaimed:

"Boys, I declare I don't know where I am going!"

"Stop, then," said Zedekiah Dee, "and let's git our bearings afore we run into the clutches of some of the red purgatorians."

"Yes, be certain by all means," said Frank, "for there are several canoes with savages creeping around over the bay in search of us. In order to elude them we were compelled to bend our course several times, consequently we got lost in the fog, and were going at right-angles with your course when you ran into us."

"Lost, by Jee-rusalem!" exclaimed Dee, unable to get his course, "if I war on land you couldn't fool me as to the points of the compass. But I'm no sailor."

"Billy, you're a sailor-boy; give us the north point of the compass," said Frank.

"The narth pint av me hat!" retorted Billy. "All me senses are water-soaked, and devil the thing do I know."

"Let's wait and mebbey they'll fire the cannon," suggested Idaho Tom.

"Sh!" commanded Dee.

A canoe, propelled rapidly by three or four paddles, shot suddenly across their bows and sped on into the distant night and fog.

"It's a boat in search of us," said young Caselton; "they know, some way or other, that we're on the bay, and are trying to cut us off from the island."

"If we are likely to fall into the Indians' power, uncle," said Zoe, addressing the old trapper, "throw me overboard into the lake. I would rather die than fall into their power."

"Tut! tut! child," replied the borderman, in a gentle, reproving tone, "we'll all die rather than see harm come to you—ah! there's our course!"

A broad sheet of flame was seen off to the right, and at the same instant the thunderous boom of the little howitzer rolled out through the fog.

Idaho Tom turned the canoe and pulled out in the direction of the island as indicated by the flash of the cannon.

Suddenly a loud, imperative voice called out:

"Halt! Who comes there?"

It was the voice of Hubert Leland.

"Tis I, father!" cried Zoe, in wild delight.

"God be praised!" exclaimed the father, in joyous accents, and when the boat touched the island, he was there with open arms to receive his child.

"Hoorah!" shouted the Mad Trapper, at the top of his great lungs, as he and his companions sprang from the canoe; "now let the demons of Molock come on."

His shout of triumph was repeated by the Boy Hunters, and answered by a hundred savage throats along the shores of the bay.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

LELAND EXPLAINS.

SHORTLY after our friends had reached the island, a general attack was made by the Indians upon the place, but they were repulsed with heavy loss; and, withdrawing from the bay, they attempted no further demonstrations.

Joy reigned supreme during the remainder of the night. The father and child were happy over their reunion, and the Boy Hunters and the Mad Trapper in recounting the adventures of the night.

By day-dawn every savage had, withdrawn from sight, though no one believed they had retired entirely from the lake and their conquest.

The sun was up long hours before it looked over the mountain-top, and lifted the dense fog from the bosom of the bay; but, finally, it burst forth in all its splendor, and rolled back the veil of ethereal lace-work from the brow of the great mountain and the bosom of the water.

The islanders and their new friends breakfasted early, after which an hour or so was consumed in demonstrating the wonderful powers of the battery concealed in the skiff, each one of the Boy Hunters, including Idaho Tom, testing the medicine to their satisfaction. Hubert Leland appeared to be highly pleased with the honor of explaining the workings, wonders and philosophy of the electric battery to the boys, although Frank Caselton and Perry Bassett knew much about the instruments, before.

Leland finally called the Boy Hunters around him, and having requested them to be seated, he said:

"Boys, the past night has been a momentous one to all of us; and to you am I indebted for my existence now, also that of my daughter and friends."

"Mr. Leland," said Frank Caselton, "I am sure you owe us nothing, since it was our Christian duty to help you in your hour of need and distress, as you and your daughter did for me."

"Yes; that is the true meaning of man's duty to his fellow-beings, when the right construction is put upon it. But there is another matter of which I wish to speak to you; and it is this: I know you are all somewhat puzzled over our occupation here upon this island, and I don't know that I could find fault with you for it. But when you leave here, I want it to be with the assurance that you have not been fighting in defense of men of a doubtful character. Therefore, it is my purpose to tell you, and tell you honestly, too, exactly what we are driving at, upon this floating island and upon this bay."

"In the first place, I will go back several years and begin at the beginning, in order to be explicit. In the year eighteen hundred and fifty, a party of six men, of whom one was a brother of mine, became affected with the California gold fever, and, fixing up, they struck out for the Pacific slope. From that time up to within the past year, not one of that little party was ever heard from. We all supposed they had been killed, or died, or had become so isolated that they cared nothing about those they had left behind, and so neglected to write. But last summer, Zedekiah Dee, while hunting in the east foothills of the Rocky Mountains, found in a cavern a human skeleton. By its side was a rifle, pistol, and knife; also a silver tobacco-box. In this box was a paper giving a brief history of the adventures and death of five of these miners, the sixth one being the writer himself. This latter person was my brother. The paper stated that they had reached the land of gold in safety, and after three years of hard work, had all accumulated independent fortunes, with which they set out for their homes. As there were no public conveyances in those days to which they could intrust the carriage of their treasure, they procured pack-animals for the purpose."

"By this time the main route by way of the South Pass, as well as that by Sante Fe, had become infested with robbers who made a business of preying on homeward-bound gold-seekers; and so our friends concluded to travel a route of their own selection. But, some way or other, the outlaws or robbers got wind of their departure and followed them up. The robbers came upon them a day or two after they started, when a sharp fight ensued. One of the miners was killed, but the robbers were defeated; but being reinforced, kept up the pursuit day and night. Our friends' pack-animals finally gave out near this lake, and in order to save their lives, the miners were compelled to abandon their gold. That it might not fall into the robbers' hands, and in hopes of being able to recover it again some day, they sunk their treasure in different parts of this bay after night, then hurried on. But now, new dangers and privations beset their path, and one by one they died of hunger or were shot down by unseen savage foes, until all but my brother were dead. He succeeded in getting through the mountain, only to die in a lonely cavern after the worst of the journey was over with. But, as I said before, he left a history of the unfortunate band in his tobacco-box, with a written request that it be forwarded to me with the contents. Fortunately, it fell into Zedekiah Dee's hands, and the honest old trapper came hundreds of miles to deliver over the last request of my dead kindred. Well, I hunted out all the friends of the unfortunate miners, and suggested to them that we go West and search the lake of Tahoe, or Silver Bay, rather, for the sunken treasure. In this they readily acquiesced. We knew, however, that it would be a difficult task, for the deposits of years had been accumulating in the bay, and sands shifting, about, until it might be ten feet beneath the bottom of the bay."

"The first thing we did was to send a party out to examine into, and report on the condition of the bay, and the surrounding country in general. The

report being favorable, we began preparations for coming West. We prepared for a long stay, and every contingency for our safety. The company being soon fitted out, teams were sent on through with our outfit. When we arrived here, we found this floating island upon the bay, with everything growing upon it as you now see, unless it was a few flowers since planted by Zoe. Who built the island, I cannot tell. It must have been done years and years ago. But I do know, however, that it has been a splendid thing for our purpose. When we came here, we thought it best to employ some experienced borderman, and so we succeeded in obtaining friend Dee, there. He has served us faithfully and nobly. We kept him stationed on shore to watch out for approaching danger and suspicious characters; and whenever any were discovered, it was communicated to us so that we could suspend operations and conceal our real object. We were afraid if it got to be generally known what we were after here, we would have trouble with adventurers. To facilitate matters between shore and island, a telegraph line was established between here and the trapper's cabin, with two branch offices along the shore, concealed among the rocks and hills. In order to operate this line of communication it became necessary to keep one man ashore with friend Dee, but under the teachings of that man and Zoe, the trapper proved an apt scholar and soon learned to operate the battery, send and receive messages himself. This gave us another man aboard the island. The telegraph has no doubt been our sole salvation, although we have suffered the loss, by death, of two of our companions since we came here. They were the men, Tom, that won the ring from you at the 'Ophir Exchange.'"

Idaho Tom grew red in the face, and for a moment remained speechless.

"The trapper," he finally remarked, "was telling me about them, also the history of that ring, Mr. Leland," and the youth went on and related what we have already heard pass between him and the old trapper."

"Father," exclaimed Zoe, when he had concluded the story, "I know this to be true, for Molock admitted to me that he was the man that rode in the coach with us, and passed himself as a detective. He said that when you called for my jewels, I put them in his outstretched hand, instead of yours."

"And, friends," added Frank Caselton, "I will further corroborate the statements of Idaho Tom and Miss Leland, by saying that I found all the rest of those jewels, except the ring, on old Molock. They are cached now over on the northern side of the lake, and as soon as I can get ashore in safety, they shall be restored to their owner."

"These stories, then, Tom," resumed Hubert Leland, "exonerate you from all suspicion of complicity in the stage robbery that memorable night we journeyed through Purgatory Pass. But to resume the main thread of my story: for over two months we have been searching for the sunken treasure of our ill-fated friends. Supplied with two sets of diving armor, two men are enabled to work at the same time. They descend in the clear water, and with a small iron rod, test every thing on the bottom of the bay that has shape, as they walk around. When the territory within reach of the island has been thoroughly searched over, we move our anchorage and let the island shift into a new position."

"Hal! hal! hal!" laughed Frank Caselton; "that does away with, and completely explodes, your theory of men dwelling under the waves, Master Wild Dick."

"Wal, I towed it would turn out this way—that this island had some connection with the hull thing," the young hunter replied.

The boys enjoyed a good, hearty laugh at Dick's expense; after which Leland resumed.

"We operate our work from that large tent yonder. From the inside we descend into the water through a hole cut through the island. I attend to lowering and raising them, and work the apparatus that supplies them with fresh air. So now, boys, you know the whole mystery of the floating island. I have only to add, that, aside from the death of our two friends, our labor has been well rewarded. We have found much of the sunken treasure, and hope within the next week to close our work here. Then the floating island will be deserted to whoever may desire to take possession of it. But now, boys, that I have trusted you with our secret, I want to ask one more favor of you."

"Name it! name it!" shouted the boys.

"It is that you keep this a secret until we get away from this lake."

Every boy seemed to vie with the others in being first to promise the old man that upon his word and honor he would never reveal the secret intrusted to him.

And they kept their promise sacred.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE END OF THE COMPACT.

THE Boy Hunters, including Idaho Tom, spent most of the day upon the floating island, but, as the sun began to decline westward, the young Outlaw of Silverland expressed his determination of taking his departure for Virginia City soon. The others had been prevailed upon to remain through another night upon the island, as Zedekiah Dee expressed a fear that the Indians would renew the attack as soon as night fell. But Tom could not be induced to stay. He seemed uneasy and restless about something or other, and kept walking impatiently about the island, as if he desired to say something, that he could not get shaped into the proper language.

Finally the youth noticed that Frank Caselton and Zoe were absent from the main party, and in walking about discovered them standing together under the shadows of a manzanita, at the northern end of the island.

Turning, he walked to where they were, and in a kind, polite tone, tinged with sadness, said:

"Pardon my intrusion, my young friends. I come to bid you good-by. I could not leave without."

"Then you are determined to leave us, are you, Tom?" Zoe said, her heart touched deeply with pity for the handsome boy.

"Yes; I can be of no further service to you folks, Zoe," he replied. "I have spent many pleasant, for all they were exciting, days around the shores of Tahoe. It is needless for me to say why

they have been pleasant, for both of you know. I am willing, however, to submit to my destiny, painful though it may be. Zoe could not love but one, and she has the divine right to that choice. It was no motive of her own that determined the scale of her affection should turn, and so, Frank, I congratulate you upon your success. It needs no words to tell me that you have won the heart of Zoe Leland. And, Zoe, I believe he is fully worthy of your love. You both have my best wishes as to the future. You both are deserving of a happy life. May God bless you both and sanctify your love. Farewell, Zoe—farewell, Frank."

He shook hands with each, then turning walked away to where Zedekiah Dee was waiting in a canoe to take him ashore.

Entering the canoe the trapper sent the craft out into the bay.

Tom rose to his feet and waving a last adieu to those upon the island, turned his face toward the shore and seated himself.

In a few minutes they reached the northern beach. Tom sprang out, and turning grasped the hand of the trapper, who stood erect in the prow of the canoe, and said, in a serious tone:

"Zedekiah, I have lost."

"Lost what, Tom?"

"Zoe's love."

"Indeed, Tom?"

"Yes; she loves Frank."

"Well, it's a big loss, Tom; for she is a cherubim if ever there was one on earth. But, you will soon forget your loss, my boy. Your heart will outgrow its wound. This I know from experience. Old Zedekiah Dee loved once—when he was a boy; but he lost. His heart healed over. You have youth and health, and a prospect of long life before you. And now, Tom, take my advice; you stand this very moment upon the edge of a terrible abyss—an abyss of moral destruction. You are naturally a little wild, and are now disappointed. I know it wouldn't take much to push you over the precipice to your ruin. Take my advice, and live a temperate, honest life. Try and improve always for the better and you will reap your reward in the end."

"I will do so, friend trapper, God willing. So good-by, Zed."

He cast a longing farewell glance toward the island, then turned and strode away, whistling a lively air to himself to keep down the emotions struggling upward in his heart.

THE END.

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